

Chapter 11: Communities resisting environmental injustice in India: philanthrocapitalism and incorporation of people's movements

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<1>A diverse, fragmented movement

In December 2014 hundreds of activists gathered in Bhopal for the 30th anniversary of the gas disaster at the Union Carbide insecticide factory in the city. At a gathering for solidarity activists from outside Bhopal and 'Mela (festival) of the Alternatives', diverse community groups, social movements and NGOs held stalls and exhibitions. There were activists fighting against nuclear power, uranium mining, coal mining, military testing, pesticides; advocating for the rights of Adivasis, Dalits, women, peasants, workers, displaced communities; and projects working in community development, alternative production, recycling initiatives, grassroots health promotion, social movement development and workers' mobilisation. A handful of those who had travelled to Bhopal for the anniversary had come from outside India: health activists from Japan brought solidarity from the victims of Minamata mercury pollution disaster; a group of trade union occupational health activists from Scotland (including Eurig); a message of solidarity from Friends of the Earth International. The vast majority of those present were from communities campaigning for environmental justice in different parts of India.

The anniversary event was organised by the International Campaign for Justice in Bhopal, an alliance of local community and trade union based survivors' groups and solidarity campaigns with international supporters, with a structure that ensures that the solidarity activists are accountable to the survivors. One group that was not present was the Bhopal Gas *Peedit Mahila Udyog Sangathan* (BGPMUS / Organisation of Bhopal Gas Affected Women Workers), a separate Bhopal survivors' group, which organised commemorations with its own solidarity networks (Bhopal Survivors Movement Study, 2009). The event perhaps illustrates some core aspects of the Indian environmental justice movement more widely, the contradictory tensions of diversity, solidarity and division. The Bhopal survivors' movement, like the wider Indian environmental justice movement, has seen a few victories and many defeats in its struggle for justice.

Although the Indian environmental justice movement has seen some celebrated successes (such as the Dongria Kondh tribal community's iconic victory against British mining corporation Vedanta in 2014) there have been many high profile defeats (including the completion of the Sardar Sarovar dam on the Narmada river in defiance of the long running campaign led by the *Narmada Bachao Andolan*). Indeed, Whitehead (2003) has argued that the focus on celebrity environmental movements, or 'selective hegemony', has been part of the weakness of the movement and, we would add, an opportunity for exploitation that has not been missed by the interests of capital. Meanwhile, the number of fronts in the battle for environmental justice has multiplied. It is not that the vibrancy of the struggle has diminished, but rather that it is spread across India in fragmented diversity.

A major expansion of oil refining and extraction is extending along the coast and land adjacent to the Bay of Bengal and proposal to develop a Petroleum, Chemicals and Petrochemicals Investment Region (PCPIR). This is expected to lead to large scale petrochemical development through the entire coast of Tamil Nadu through a major extension to the polluting industries at State Industries Promotion Corporation of Tamil Nadu (SIPCOT) in Cuddalore (Narayan and Scandrett, 2012). Chennai is destined to be the coastal hub for export trade. This is part of the network of Special Economic Zones and interstate investment corridors that are expanding throughout India.

Communities around the Cauvery delta have been mobilising in opposition to oil extraction and the PCPIR. There have been some oil spillages and local communities have organised protests. City based environmental activists are supporting communities, filing Right To Information demands and collating information. A public hearing in connection with one of the proposed oil wells mobilised the community and environmental activists, who gathered information on environmental clearances that had been granted and thereby came to the hearing prepared. The community had already started organising before involving environmentalists, they were already aware that the oil developments were bad for their health and livelihoods. They organised protests which police have responded to with some arrests, so they had already experienced how the state responds to dissent, but decided to engage with legal process alongside protest. Communities made contact with environmental activists in Chennai (including Dharmesh), who have been able to respond with technical support, Right to Information requests, collating information and guidance on licenses and Environmental Clearances and preparing for public

hearings. We have been able to develop this material into a popular education format, but it was entirely dependent on the communities organising themselves in the first instance.

<1>Historical context

The immediate post-independence period under Nehru has been categorised as ‘passive revolution’ in which a capitalist class, formerly held back by British colonial rule, lacked the strength to assume complete power in its own interests, and was dependent on compromise with other classes – notably the urban political elite and bureaucracy and the rural landowning class. This period was dominated by scientific planning and state-led development ranging from major engineering projects such as large dams (Nehru’s temples of development) to such technological interventions as the green revolution (the introduction of high yielding varieties of crops, dependent on capital input in the form of agrochemicals and infrastructure). The emphasis on scale, coupled with the balance of class forces led, in both of these cases to highly uneven development, with economic (and, indirectly, political) power concentrated in the hands of narrow class interests – urban bourgeoisie and rural elites with large landholdings – at the expense of subaltern groups and the environment (Whitehead, 2003).

During this period, the Indian Ministry of Community Development embarked on an ambitious programme of rural development through the progressive empowerment and democratisation of village councils, or *Panchayat*. Launched in 1952, by 1964 the programme covered the whole country. Workers were assigned to village *Panchayats*, there was a focus on agricultural production, economic development was promoted through cooperatives and there were initiatives to increase the participation of women and young people. Nonetheless, as Karunaratne (1976) points out, popular involvement in the project was negligible. Indeed, he suggests that the power structure of rural villages remained unchanged – or was reinforced. Decisions about rural development were made by the village elite and the workers under their patronage, whilst the majority of rural poor contributed only their unpaid labour – through deference and habitual obedience or coercion – to the construction of infrastructure, from which the elite castes and landowning classes primarily benefitted. Additionally, at a regional level, a bureaucratic elite emerged with its own vested interests. Educational programmes largely focused on functional

literacy, disconnected from the demands of rural communities. Community development became a top-down, target-orientated means of harnessing local labour for the interests of those with power.

As a result community development became a discredited term for those engaged in local mobilisation, and was replaced with the more politically infused 'community organising' in defence of excluded and disempowered communities, classes and castes. This was particularly important during the Indira Gandhi interregnum, from her first election in 1966 to her assassination in 1984. Rural interests achieved greater influence alongside a populist rhetoric of subaltern empowerment. Class conflicts intensified and state repression ratcheted up, particularly during the Emergency of 1975 to 1977 and into the 1980s. As Andharia (2009) argues:

A generation of teachers and activists from 1980s onwards who began to associate themselves with mass-based struggles, discovered different strategies and new allies and questioned conventional moorings of western forms of institutionalized social work and its relevance to India. Grassroots empowerment took precedence over community development and saw greater involvement of community organizers and scholars in issues of exclusion, violation and assertion of rights, discrimination against dalits, tribals and other marginalized groups. (Andharia, 2009: 277)

Environmental justice conflicts played an important role in this development, including the iconic struggles of Bhopal and the Narmada river – examples of what Whitehead (2003) calls 'selective hegemony', the selection of struggles which resonate with western audiences, through the attention of NGOs, funders and the mass media, distorting the influence of and generating division amongst different struggles.

In the 1990s, the introduction of the New Economic Programme (NEP) facilitated greater inward investment and privatisation and greater conflict between subaltern groups and ruling class (and caste) factions (Corrbridge and Harriss, 2003). Dalit, Adivasi and Scheduled Caste groups increasingly resisted long-standing oppressions and humiliations, encouraged by state level anti-caste pronouncements which were regularly betrayed by local state functionaries who were instrumental in violent backlash. As Corrbridge and Harriss contend, in some regions 'the price of labour ... is determined by the balance of forces between the armies of the upper castes (usually with police support) and the armies of the labouring poor' (Corrbridge and Harriss,

2003: 206). Further, such struggles have often been fought over the terrain of access to environmental resources as the Indian state sought to dispossess its poorest and most excluded communities, either directly or through facilitating dispossession by private interests. 'Because India lacks the colonial resource frontier that was available to the major European powers, it is forced to exploit its own resource base to meet the needs of its city-based or elite populations' (Corbridge and Harriss, 2003: 207).

The Land Acquisition Act of 1854 governed the process of land acquisition in post-independence India and allowed for the dispossession of land for 'public purpose' by a government agency from individual landowners in return for government determined compensation. Most developmental projects today owe their existence to this British era legislation. It was not until 2013 that the Act was repealed but not until several mass movements over unfair land acquisition and misuse demanded a change. Most contentious was the 'public purpose' clause that features in most eminent domain legislations globally. This clause allowed the government to forcibly acquire land from farmers often in return for poor compensation.

Farmers who found themselves with a piece of land earmarked for development were compelled to accept the compensation scheme, no matter how unfair. Until the 1990s, the Act was used to make way for projects of state owned companies like Steel Authority of India, Indian Railways, Coal India Ltd., and so on. However, after liberalisation, the Act continued to remain in use but the definition of 'public purpose' kept expanding in scope to include projects by private investors. These could include luxury hotels to industrial corridors to car factories and often land was devalued through bureaucratic connivance and owners were forced to sell at low prices. Many states, like Rajasthan, acquired land but failed to use it for intended purposes giving rise to a whole new politics of dispossession where the state usurped the role of the landlord.

Despite the widespread misuse of the legislation, successive Indian policy makers refused to repeal or amend the Land Acquisition Act of 1854. As the Indian economy continued to liberalise, the Act came to be seen as a piece of legislation aimed at reversing the achievements of the post independence Land Gift Movement championed by Vinoba Bhave in 1951. Mass movements against land acquisition like the *Narmada Bachao Andolan* (against big dams) and the *POSCO Pratirodh Sangram Samiti* (against a steel plant, see Vijayalakshmi, 2015) raised the

crucial question – was the state a landlord, a trustee or an owner? Moreover, was it above the law?

Such struggles however have not led to progressive emancipation of subaltern groups or environmental controls. Indeed, various tactics have been employed to defend class interests and undermine such resistance, from the state violence of Operation Green Hunt against the Naxalite movement and Adivasi communities, to hegemonic control such as Hindutva and the civil society strength of the *Sangh Parivar* (in both cases involving complementary battles of cultural ideology and extreme violence). As Baviskar (2005) notes, the iconic (and often romanticised) *Chipko* movement in Himachal Pradesh found association with Hindu nationalism rather than environmental justice increasingly served its interests.

Harvey (2005) argues that neoliberalism is distinguished by an increase in ‘accumulation by dispossession’, a form of return to primitive accumulation in which capital accumulation shifts more towards direct expropriation rather than exploitation of surplus labour value, and such accumulation is not accompanied by class formation but rather pauperisation. As such, unlike the labour process, accumulation by dispossession leads to a fragmented and disempowered opposition making anti-capitalist action difficult. Alliance-based movements such as the National Association of Peoples’ Movements (NAPM) find it increasingly difficult to build wider political struggles from a progressively fragmented and defensive range of grassroots struggles. Victims of accumulation by dispossession include those subject to land grabs or through direct expropriation, through neo-latifundisation, urban gentrification programmes, climate refugees, foreclosure of assets and so on. As Cox and Nilsen (2014) argue, social movement processes can go backwards during periods of intensive mobilisation by movements from above,

Violence has always been integral to enforcing Indian class discipline since the British colonial era. Arguably the current fusion of communal and state-sanctioned violence under Prime Minister Modi’s BJP government, with the increasingly diverse mechanisms of dispossession, constitutes a war of manoeuvre in the implementation of neoliberalism (Gramsci, 1971). Such a war of manoeuvre may however be facilitating a war of position in which capital dispossession is occurring through hegemonic means through the incorporation of resistance through philanthrocapitalism.

Writing before the Modi government, Whitehead (2003) argued that neoliberal accumulation by dispossession in India has been accompanied by a ‘reverse primitive accumulation’ which has prevented the level of widespread destitution which might lead to revolutionary social unrest.

High levels of capital intensity in industry, resource extraction on an unprecedented scale, and large-scale appropriation of smallholdings in agriculture through indebtedness, render the uptake of the majority of dispossessed small farmers and tribal populations in industrial work at presently high levels of capital intensity impossible. Nor would emigration, as occurred for the dispossessed of Europe in the nineteenth century, to ‘empty’, or rather emptied, settler colonies, be likely on a large scale either. Rather, India’s contemporary capitalist development would be marked by large-scale accumulative dispossession accompanied by state attempts at reversals of primitive accumulation, so that the subsistence ‘needs’ of formally dispossessed agrarian and urban households would be continued in some form. (Whitehead, 2003: 287)

Resistance to this development, according to Whitehead, is failing. The traditional left (principally the Communist Party of India and Communist Party of India (Marxist)) has engaged in electoral politics and often advocated the interests of subaltern groups, but their commitment to support for the post-colonial bourgeoisie, land reform, limited redistribution, industrialisation and neoliberalism (especially exposed through the violence of communist cadres in Nandigram in 2007) has exposed the limits of their value in transforming the prospects of the most marginalised, and contributed to their electoral collapse. The Maoist Naxalite movement is responding to Adivasi dispossession but has a tendency, Whitehead (2003) argues, towards the abuse of violence (for power and extortion) and the perpetration of superfluous, indiscriminate violence. Adivasi communities are frequently caught in the cross fire and mutual violations between Naxalites and state forces and the latter’s sponsored militia in the *Salwa Judum*.

Whitehead also criticises the social and people’s movements which have emerged from environmental justice struggles. She argues that such movements, as typified by the NAPM, are constrained by romantic Gandhian ruralism and limited utopian ecosocialism. We would question that characterisation. Whilst romanticism and utopianism are certainly present, and Gandhian ecologists have played an important role in the recent nonviolent actions of the Narmada movement, the peoples’ movements are more varied and complex than this.

The connection between affected communities and broader movements can be understood as social movement process (Cox and Nilsen, 2014). As Nilsen (2010) analyses in the *Narmada Bachao Andolan*, local rationalities of resilience can transform into militant particularism and social movement through a process of analysis of the limitation of struggle against ‘movements from above’, such as ruling class realignment and power grab of neoliberalism. Activists from outwith the communities can contribute to this process, not through ‘leadership’ but through a dialectical interaction between the local and the extra-local, or general, providing a stimulus for analysis (Freire, 1972).

<1>Funding neoliberalism through philanthrocapitalism

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is not new in India but escalated with the NEP to the point of being legislated for by Narendra Modi’s government in 2014. Subsequently, funding has become highly politicised. The principal sources of funds for community organising are corporations’ CSR budgets, and international Foundations (such as Ford, Rockefeller, Bill and Melinda Gates). CSR is primarily orientated towards humanitarian objectives and avoids any groups that are critical of corporations. Local CSR funding goes to projects that pose no challenge to the status quo, such as Modi’s *Swachh Bharat Abhiyan* Cleanliness campaign, but no company will fund a fight against a company. The main alternative is foreign funding, but this is subject to different political pressures. The Modi government has taken a strong stand on international funding from a nationalist perspective, with vigorous implementation of the Funding Contribution (Regulation) Act of 2010 and high profile NGOs like Greenpeace being targeted. Whilst there have been narratives of suspicion concerning foreign funding since Indira Gandhi’s allegations of the ‘foreign hand’, the anti-foreign funding rhetoric has become much more shrill and associated with Hindu nationalism. Meanwhile, the funding from international sources has become increasingly market orientated (Plank, 2017). The funding regime applies business models from capitalism, with superficial metrics, targets, monitoring and audit. There is a lack of honest critique as activists clamour for small pots of money, and marketing exercises compete as to who is more poor and deserving than whom. Philanthrocapitalism feeds on selective hegemony.

Through philanthrocapitalism, the narratives and priorities of the development sector have been increasingly dominated by the agendas of global capital. Smart Cities; climate resilience; air

pollution; marine litter: these have become the core issues due to philanthrocapitalist investment. This trend increasingly limits the space for questioning the capitalist structure that is causing waste, climate change, pollution or plastics, or for a critique of the oil industry or the corporations. Through cultural hegemony (Plank, 2017) the agenda has become determined by the interests of corporate finance, dominated by a narrative of entrepreneurship, management, targets, technology, and South Asian ‘problems’ rather than tackling the source of the problems: capitalism, consumption, western lifestyle, US generated problems. In addition to this indirect influence, Foundations also directly shape government agendas, through their offices in City Administration buildings.

‘Smart Cities’ use information technology to increase operational efficiency and facilitate communication (or at least information) between government and the public. This looks radical and democratic, and gives the impression of addressing the problems, but in fact the terms of the problem are set by neoliberal capitalism the problems of which are to be managed through more privatisation and corporate involvement. Civic polity and environmental management become dependent on corporate interests.

The discourse of climate resilience is also being distorted by philanthrocapitalism . The dominant narrative is about phasing out coal and generating electricity from renewable sources, however, the consumption of energy is not questioned, neither is the corporate ownership of renewable generation. India’s massive growth in renewable energy has come at a cost in the form of land grabbing for corporate owned wind and solar farms (Krishnaswamy, 2014; Ejabatlas, 2017). The infrastructure of centralised energy generation is damaging and is subsidised by the central grid. This isn’t challenging the politics of power. India’s largest private energy company Adani Power is investing in solar parks and wind farms which essentially constitutes a land grab. Rather than climate resilience, this is provoking dispossession.

Marine litter is the most recent western driver of funding, by powerful NGOs, corporations and the world media. Even the term used, ‘litter’, serves to turn the narrative into a problem of management. It is focusing on managing plastics, not on getting rid of plastics, which would threaten the interests of the corporations. Campaigning groups like the Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives (GAIA) are arguing that plastic production must stop; nevertheless most

funding goes towards waste management projects. Communities confronting landfill and incinerator plants don't get funded, nor does more radical waste work including prevention, dematerialisation and organising rag pickers.

Zero Waste Cities – smart cities for waste – are redesigning how waste systems are structured to maximise efficiency. These are based on models of increasing waste, rather than efforts to decouple waste production from economic growth. Consumption, at the base of the waste pyramid, is not addressed. Assuming that the volume of waste produced will increase, technological solutions are sought. Hydrocarbon plastics are substituted by bioplastics manufactured from corn starch by the same corporate producers. Corn crops are thereby diverted from food production to meet consumption needs, risking food insecurity.

There is no transparency in the way that priorities are set by Foundations and international NGOs. 'Stakeholders' are consulted but it is never clear who they are or how they are selected. Those groups best able to respond to these agendas are often the NGOs based in the main power centres and linked with grassroots campaigns, but not the locally based land, water, environmental justice groups themselves. Some communities are able to sustain a radical narrative, to call out the western agendas and expose the corporate links. However, civil society has become increasingly influenced by the funding from the major foundations, and co-opted. There is a real tension in groups committed to environmental justice work concerning where funding can be obtained.

Anecdotally it is clear that some have become more accepting of Foundations, more willing to compromise and less inclined to screen sources. Philanthrocapitalist funds can be laundered through intermediaries and 'whitewashed', and can drown out other sources. There is an increasing awareness that there is no clean money and that capitalist markets are funding work on social change. The lines are increasingly blurred, making it more difficult to determine the sources of funds and where the agendas come from. The increasing use of FCRA is a factor which requires activists to consider how to maintain a radical agenda without a backlash against our work or the groups we support. The state is acting to force a binary between foreign versus corporate funding. Some of the grassroots groups choose to self-fund and are clear that they receive no outside funding. However many city based groups are increasingly required to

negotiate the agendas set by philanthrocapitalist corporations. These Foundations recognise that social change will happen and want to ensure that it works in their interests, as a class.

It is too simplistic to say that all foreign funding distorts the environmental justice movement. Aruna Roy's Right To Information movement (MKSS, Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan) receives international funding and is not distorted. It is very hard to discern what should and should not be funded, but the interests of the funders are always there. At the peak of the anti-Vedanta movement, Survival International was involved. The Indian government labelled it as 'foreign' and accused it of Maoist funding (Roshan, 2017). But the Dongria Adivasi movement's campaign to protect their land against Vedanta survived, and was funded by themselves. Survival International made the issue international but the campaign would have succeeded without their intervention. Indeed, there was a degree of co-dependence. While the Dongrias resisted on the ground, Survival International hit Vedanta in its home country where it was more vulnerable to public shaming. Grassroots groups don't need foreign funding. Many groups are able to find the resources they need locally. For example the Kudankulam anti-nuclear movement was funded by local fishermen. Similarly, the POSCO battle over the steel refinery.

The Environmental Justice movement in India largely remains without a clear direction, but small groups are trying to challenge environmental degradation. Environmental activists need to be able to respond to community demands, not go out with an attitude to 'save' them. In our experience, if communities see you as someone who will invest expertise and time in support of their interests then they will come to you from a position of grassroots strength. If they come looking for funding then their interests will be distorted by what they perceive as your interests. Environmental activists are few in number and remote from the communities on the frontline. There is an increasing awareness of the risk of attempting to organise or speak for the communities. In past decade or so, more community voices have been coming up. There are still city based groups who try to dominate and speak for everyone, but this is increasingly resisted by the communities themselves and we are hearing more diverse voices from the community. Previously a community member would be used as a prop for an NGO, but now there are increasing numbers of active spokespeople asserting the interests of the communities at global level.

Environmental justice activists are increasingly aware that we can only work with communities who are organising themselves, we can provide media, technical and scientific support.

Communities take ownership, we only make small interventions. Often it is only small numbers of people in communities that take the initiative and contact the activists for support. They are not looking for money and we are clear that we are not able to provide financial resources.

Communities organise their own resources: their reports are not fancy. There are other groups that emphasise communications and outreach, including interactive websites and toolkits, but it isn't clear whether this speaks to communities' demands. Only if it is a very big project of national significance, such as the PCPIR, then it is sometimes necessary for environmental activists to seek out the people who are mobilising in the community.

The environmental justice movement needs to be more self-critical. Capital accumulation is the key cause of the environmental injustices that we are fighting against yet some of this capital is being directed at the movement itself. We need to understand how that issue of money can itself be challenged: how can movements renegotiate their work in the face of philanthrocapitalism?

The movement is facing a pressure to splinter, competing for the same pots of money. NGOs want to 'grow', to get more money. Grassroots communities don't need that money. The irony is that the movement risks becoming dependent on capital which is causing the problems that it is resisting. This is a fundamental dialectic around which the movement is conflicted. It is dependent on consumer-capitalism to challenge consumer-capitalism. Some elements of the movement attempt to opt out, but then find that they can't be part of any change. The movement needs to be part of the problem in order to change it, but it needs to be conscious of this contradiction in order to force the change. Environmental activists need to reassess our strategies in order to support self-organised communities resisting the violators.

<1>Conclusions

The environmental justice movement in India is faced with responding to the crisis of neoliberalism and dispossession. Grassroots resistance to capital expropriation of the environment – through resource dispossession, extraction, pollution, contamination and externalisation of environmental costs – is widespread, yet is fragmented. One of its key points of conflict is its own source of resources. There are many incidents of grassroots community mobilisation who draw entirely from their own resources to challenge corporations and the state,

often making use of the expertise of environmental activists who themselves are limited in their access to resources. Such self supported groups tend to be small, fragmented and limited in the extent to which they can coordinate with other such groups in order to build a movement to challenge the causes of the environmental despoliation in the accumulation of capital. They might win local concessions or even battles, but the main problem, the structure of accumulation needs a broader movement. Where such groups are coordinated into a wider movement, they are often faced with the dilemma of funds.

The most available local funding source is CSR, which by definition cannot be used for challenging corporations. International sources of funding is distorted by several factors. The biggest sources of funds is from global philanthrocapitalists, either Foundations established by entrepreneurs, such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, or through international NGOs. In both cases, the means by which funding priorities are determined remain opaque, often apparently driven by media interest in the west, and the mechanisms of accountability for funding adopt a business model from capitalist enterprise, leading to superficial measures for monitoring and accounting. The impact of this on community organising is corrupting. Activists' are torn between their accountability to funders and the affected communities. Funding is disproportionately received by NGOs in the political centre with links to grassroots struggles. Communities compete in a 'beauty contest' to be the most needy, most iconic, or most compliant with accounting procedures. Where campaigns are able to obtain more independent international funds which allow for community determined challenges to the interests of capital in development (which corresponds with the interests of the neoliberal state), then these risk falling foul of FCRA regulations.

Thus, movements challenging the neoliberal causes of dispossession are often caught up in a contradiction of relying on funding sources which are themselves dependent on neoliberal dispossession. Refusing to do so can consign the struggle to, at best, local concessions and at worst, irrelevance. Communities discern their own tactics on the basis of their local conditions. Environmental activists are able to provide limited support and accountability to communities, with a constant tension concerning sources of funds. Wider movements seeking to build alliances across multiple community struggles must try to hold together these disparate tactics and this is leading to a loss of direction. The movement needs to analyse this contradiction in order to challenge at source the neoliberal direction of increasing dispossession.

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