Understanding the Existential Crisis of Environmental Movements in Neoliberal India

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The cases of Narmada Bachao Andolan and the Anti-Nuclear Movement at Kudankulam taught that environmental movements in neoliberal India are in 'existential crises'. This crisis is associated with their inability to determine or change state policy and the environmental movement's ineffectiveness of the existing language to negotiate with the neoliberal state. Most of the literature about the crises of environmental movements focuses only on the neoliberal challenge and state policies. This paper uses the case study method to argue that the 'existential crises of environmental movements in India are caused not just by the state's neoliberal challenge but also by some inherent theoretical positions and internal practical flaws in the current environmental movements in India.

Keywords: Environmental movement, Narmada Bachao Andolan, Anti-Nuclear Movement at Kudankulam, Development, Neoliberal State

The environmental movement can be defined as a social movement that perceives a common interest in environmental protection, often directed against the state and demands state policy or practice changes. Several powerful and well mobilised environmental movements in post-independent India greatly impacted the state policy and public consciousness. People's Movement Against Nuclear Energy (henceforth, the PMANE), Tamil Nādu, presents a fascinating story of mass mobilisation against the state to protect the environment and livelihood. This movement is widely seen as India's most significant contemporary environmental movement, and it gave great hope to other local movements that protested against the encroachment of the state. It enables us to rethink the issues of environment, justice and development. However, despite the relentless struggles of different organisations, local people and civil society groups, the Indian Government commissioned the Kudankulam Nuclear Power Project on 22 October 2013. The movement, Narmada Bachao Andolan (henceforth, the N.B.A.), started in 1985. The supreme court's judgement in 2000 provided consent to construct the dam to ensure resettlement and rehabilitation of inhabitants in the mentioned area, giving a new dimension to this movement. As a result, the Dam construction was finished in 2006 and was inaugurated in 2017. Almost the same events happened in the anti-nuclear protest in Kudankulam. The first court verdict came in 2013 May; the verdict upheld the more significant public interest and sanctioned the commissioning of the Kudankulam nuclear power plant. These movements stand unparalleled in the history of environmental movements in independent India. Also, these movements have a common interest in environmental protection, but it has lost power to change environmental policies and practices.

According to Yanqi Tong, "environmental movement is a social movement that involves an array of individuals, groups and coalitions that perceive a common interest in environmental protection and act to bring about changes in environmental policies and practices" (Tong, 2005, pp. 167-168). It is unfair to evaluate an environmental movement merely based on the number of demands accepted by the state. The environmental movements play a significant role outside state relations. Its scope cannot be limited by merely viewing the relationship with the state. Each movement has its politics for change, preservation, or amending social rules. Environmental politics influences public consciousness so that it educates them about the necessity of environmental protection and counters the exploitation of nature. However, determining state policy is essential since the state is the major modernising force in developing countries like India. These movements are always directed against the state, and it takes the form of demanding changes in the state policy or practice. Earlier, some environmental movements in India had successfully achieved their demands through relentless struggles. Chipko Movement in the State of Uttarakhand (Shiva & Bandyopadhyay, 1986, pp. 133-142) and the Silent Valley movement in Kerala (Parameswaran, 1979, pp. 1179-1119) are the best examples of such 'successful' environmental movements. They were said to be successful because they could achieve their demands through relentless struggles against state policies. Narmada Bachao Andolan and Kudankulam's effort shows one of the longest and biggest

struggles against the state. However, finally, the state implemented its policy. It is essential to inquire about these movements' inability to influence state policy or achieve their demands. This inability to impact state policy indicates the crisis of environmental movements in neoliberal India. In this context, a close inquiry into Peoples Movement Against Nuclear Energy provides illuminating insights into the crisis that now environmental movements face.

This paper suggests that the Indian environmental movements' engagement with the neo-liberal Indian state provides crucial insights into the 'existential crises' of Indian environmental movements. Here the word 'existential crises' denotes the inability to impact the neoliberal state policy and the lack of a language of negotiation. This crisis leads to environmental movements often branded as 'Anti-development'. State and its allies propagate that environmental movements are against development projects. There has been a shift in government policy agendas in the past few decades. Earlier, natural resources were regulated primarily for conservation; now, they are regulated mainly for the market. This shift has occurred mostly due to the 'neoliberal turn' in the governance of the environmental issues that have led to the privatisation and commodification of nature (Rao, 2018, pp. 259-279). After the post-economic reforms, the definition and conception of development changed in India. According to Kohli (2011), "over time, the State in India has shifted from a reluctant pro-capitalist state with a socialist ideology to an enthusiastic pro-capitalist state with a neo-liberal ideology" (Kohli, 2011, p. 499). This shift has had a significant impact on state policies.

By making considerable investments in developing economies like India, multinational corporations offered a variety of promises like job opportunities, communication facilities and infrastructure developments. When these promises became popular, the development concept changed from bringing about change in people's lives with social justice to maximum state growth. Whenever people raised their voices for nature, land, water and the environment, they were labelled 'Anti-development'. This is not a post-reform phenomenon. Instead, it began in the 1970s. However, in a neoliberal economy, state and multinational companies successfully propagate a brand against their agenda as anti-development. This agenda also got sizeable popular support. This conceptional change labelled environmental movements as 'anti-development' movements. This, too, has escalated the crisis of environmental movements in India.

The state developed new strategies to counter challenges from the environmental movements and civil society groups. On the other hand, environmental movements lack theoretical clarity and practical strategies. In other words, the state is more equipped with a new language and clarity to communicate with people about the execution of liberal policies. At the same time, environmental movements with a lack of negotiating power in their language and lack clarity in their vision remain far behind the scenes. Unfortunately, they are fragmented too. Critically exploring this paradox, this paper argues that not only does the neoliberal challenge from the state cause the crises of environmental movements in India, but some inherent theoretical positions and internal practical flaws also cause the 'existential crises' of contemporary environmental movements in India.

The Narmada Bachao Andolan and Anti-Nuclear Movement at Kudankulam

Narmada Bachao Andolan is an Indian social movement led by native tribes (Adivasis), farmers, environmentalists, and human rights activists against many large dam projects across the Narmada River flows through the states of Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. The Narmada Basin spans approximately 94500 square kilometres between the Vindhya and the Satpura ranges of Central India. It is the site of the Narmada Valley Development Project (NVDP), which seeks to harness the river Narmada that flows through Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Gujarat, which envisages thirty big dams; one hundred and thirty-five medium dams and three thousand small dams will be constructed on the Narmada River and its forty-one tributaries. However, the Narmada basin had such characteristics that led the people to oppose the project envisaged by the state. More than 22 million people and several tribal groups live in the valley (Seirra, 2002). It is to be noted that the project was estimated to affect over 2.5 lakh of people. The Sardar Sarovar Project (S.S.P.) and the Narmada Sagar Project were the two projects that remained controversial owing to their large-scale displacement and problems of human rehabilitation. (Ashish, 1989). This paved the way for the unique protest 'Narmada Bachao Andolan'. Nearly 200,000 people would be displaced due to the Sardar Sarovar and Narmada projects. There is no comprehensive programme for their resettlement and rehabilitation. (Bhushan, 2000). The anti-dam movement has elevated the Adivasi ("indigenous" individual, a member of India's Scheduled Tribes) to a

prominent position. The Sardar Sarovar dam was erected after the Supreme Court of India approved its construction despite evidence of environmental devastation. Many labels the N.B.A. as anti-development, anti-technology, and in collusion with people who do not want India to advance. However, the Dam construction was finished in 2006 but was inaugurated only in 2017 by Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

The Kudankulam Nuclear Power Reactors are being built at Kudankulam, near India's southern tip, barely 20 kilometres from Kanyakumari. The Kudankulam Nuclear Power Project (KKNPP) deal was signed between the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and the then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in Delhi on 20 November 1988. However, the proposed foundation laying ceremony was put off indefinitely due to widespread opposition to the project by the local public. After signing the deal in 1988, several groups such as the National Alliance of People's Movements (NAPM), the Tamil Nadu Fish Workers Union (TNFU), the Social Action Movement (S.A.M.), the Peace Association for Social Action (PASA), Group for the Peaceful Indian Ocean (GPIO) et cetera., and several others, directly or indirectly opposed the Kudankulam project in various parts of Tamil Nadu (Udayakumar, 2004). On 11 January 1989, a massive rally was held at Nagercoil against the project. Though the KKNPP deal was signed on 20 November 1988, it remained shelved for almost nine years and was revived only in 1997. The construction of the power plant is undertaken by the Nuclear Power Corporation of India Limited (NPCIL), and Kudankulam Nuclear Power Project (KKNPP) is the biggest nuclear power plant in India, with a capacity of 6000 MW.

From the inception of the Kudankulam Nuclear Power Project (KKNPP), the Government had misled people at Kudankulam with promises by offering them jobs and providing them fresh and safe water from Pechiparai Dam to Kanyakumari district and assuring significant development of the area. However, since the deal was signed, the local people and anti-nuclear activists in Kanyakumari, Tirunelveli and Thoothukudi districts in Tamil Nadu have opposed the KKNPP. The anti-nuclear movement at Kudankulam is mainly led by a group named- the Peoples Movement Against Nuclear Energy (PMANE), which aimed at shutting down the nuclear power plant. The anti-nuclear activists and local people at Kudankulam had asked for the Environment Impact Assessment and Safety Analysis Reports. The Department of Atomic Energy (DAE) and the Government of India had not released the Environment Impact Assessment (E.I.A.), the Site Evaluation Study, and the Safety Analysis Report, which are claimed to have been done way back in 1988 for the KKNPP, and none has been released before the public.

The Tamil Nadu Government G.O. 828 (29.4.1991 – Public Works Department) establishes that the "area between 2 to 5 km radius around the plant site, [would be] called the sterilisation zone", which means that people within the stipulated area would be displaced (Kumar & Ambigai, 2012). However, the KKNPP authorities have orally assured them that they would not be replaced. According to the data available, there are at least three large settlements within the 5-km zone: Kudankulam (population 20,000), Idinthakarai (population 12,000) and a tsunami rehabilitation colony known as Casanagar Township, which is hardly 700 metres away from the reactor (population 2000-plus). Kudankulam and Idinthakarai are just two to four kilometres from the plant. Moreover, parts of the tsunami colony are less than a kilometre from the reactors (Bidwai & Ramana, 2007). The population in the 16-km radius is at least 70,000, far exceeding the AERB (Atomic Energy Regulatory Board) stipulations. In case of a nuclear disaster at Kudankulam, it will be pretty impossible to evacuate this many people quickly and efficiently.

The majority of the people living in this region are fisher folks. The closure of the fishing beach in Kudankulam for constructing a unique jetty for heavy land equipment has already affected the livelihood of these fisher folks (Bidwai & Ramana,2007). The coolant water and low-grade waste from the KKNPP are believed to be dumped into the sea, which will severely impact fish production and catch. This will severely undermine the fishing industry and push the fisherfolks into deeper poverty and misery in Tamil Nadu. The Kerala Kudankulam nuclear reactor is believed to add more to the already high level of background radiation in southern Kerala and Tamil Nadu. The norms relating to not locating nuclear projects in the sensitive coastal zone have also been violated (Rao & Ramana, 2008, p. 17). Unforeseen natural disasters like earthquakes and tsunamis also pose a severe threat to the safety of nuclear power plants. The local community and protesters' demands and concerns have not been addressed yet.

The Atomic Energy Regulatory Board (AERB) is the primary institution concerned with nuclear safety in India. As the AERB is not an independent, autonomous body, the AERB cannot make an independent evaluation regarding the safety and problems related to nuclear installations in India. The Atomic Energy Act of 1962, which is secretive, has been frequently used by the D.A.E. officials to threaten and silence the

opponents and critics who question their plans and projects (Peace Now, 2009, p. 32). The Act restrains nuclear information sharing even more stringently. The state of affairs has not changed even with adopting the Right to Information (R.T.I.) Act. Appeals under the R.T.I act have only resulted in continued denial of the most sought-after information, citing them as those related to the security and strategic affairs of the State (Peace Now,2009). Thus, the impenetrable secrecy and opacity of the D.A.E. undermine India's democratic heritage. Even when European countries like Germany, Italy, et cetera have decided to phase out their Nuclear Power plants (W.N.A, 2021), countries like India are promoting nuclear energy and the construction of Nuclear Power plants. The central government and its nuclear administrative institutions like AERB, D.A.E., NPCIL, et cetera have all thwarted the anti-nuclear movement at Kudankulam, citing development concerns for the country. They say that development is essential to ensure the well-being of people. Thus, the central Government and the Government of Tamil Nadu have conveniently ignored the issues raised by the anti-nuclear movement relating to the common man, environment, and biodiversity.

The Supreme Court's verdict on the Kudankulam issue highlighted three significant points: firstly, the judges believed nuclear energy was necessary for India's progress. Secondly, they had complete faith in India's nuclear establishment to perform this role. Thirdly, they said that more importance should be given to more significant public interest and that apprehensions of the minority should be sidelined to make way for the country's progress. All three observations are extremely contested propositions. This judgment gave judicial sanctity to these contestable claims and ultimately overlooked the Kudankulam-specific violations of the Government's norms raised by the petitioners. Thus, the Supreme Court's judgement on Kudankulam would also go down in India's history in tune with the Narmada Dam verdict, showing the inability of our post-independence democratic institutions to overcome the narrowly defined boundaries of more considerable public interest, development/growth and national conscience (Sundaram, 2013). Despite these protests against the Kudankulam Nuclear Power plant, the Government has successfully made it operational since 2013. The construction of units 5 and 6 are underway.

The changing governments- both at the centre and state had formed commissions to study the safety of the nuclear power plant and engage themselves in a series of discussions with the anti-nuclear protesters at Kudankulam. They failed to convince the protestors regarding the safety of the plant. Instead, the Government resorted to tactics of filing cases of sedition, foreign fund allegations and aggressive media campaigns against the activists. Thus, they successfully opposed anti-nuclear resistance, citing development reasons without addressing the core concerns like safety, displacement and environmental impact. The land rights, right to life and livelihood will all be seriously thwarted by the nuclear estate, the Government, its institutions, and agents. The people's views for whom all this development is being planned do not matter to the authorities. What matters is the perception of the ruling elites and business lobbies concerning what is suitable for the people. Thus plans for setting up new nuclear power plants in many parts of India exhibit a blatant disregard for the human rights of millions of people and the overall environment.

Recasting the Ecocentrism-Anthropocentrism Question

Against this background, looking at the history of these two movements, which are intensely active in various parts of post-independence India, helps us understand the particular characteristics of Indian environmental movements and the genealogy of their dilemma. The theories about environmental questions revolve mainly around the debates of ecocentrism and anthropocentrism. Anthropocentrism, as a term from environmental and political philosophy, denotes a human-centred ethical system; that is, human beings are the sole bearers of intrinsic value or possess more excellent intrinsic value than non-human nature. At the same time, ecocentrism as a term in ecological and political philosophy denotes a nature-centred system of values. So, there is a subsequent ethical claim for equality of intrinsic value across human and non-human nature (Baviskar, 2011, p. 499). This ideological division reflects the difference in the operation of environmental movements. However, these ideological divisions, such as environmentalism or ecologism, are not adequate for understanding the operation of Indian environmental movements. This inability to categorise the Indian environmental movements based on the conventional theoretical debates has mainly three reasons, identified as the peculiarity of Indian environmental movements. That does not mean anthropocentrism and ecocentrism debates are absent in India. Theoretically speaking, these debates are directly or indirectly present in India. However, to understand the operation of Indian environmental movements, the said ideological framework is

insufficient. It is essential to understand the peculiarity of environmental movements in India. Unless we understand the uniqueness of Indian environmental movements, it is impossible to understand the crisis of environmental movements in India.

The first peculiarity of Indian environmental movements is that the mentality towards nature is different from the West in this part of the world. This difference in the mentality toward nature is due to what Akeel Bilgrami (2014) calls Modernity's mentality. There are different interpretations of Modernity. Nevertheless, Modernity has some unique features as a historical juncture in the West. Charles Taylor (2003) defines Modernity as "mean(s) that historically unprecedented amalgam of new practices and institutional forms (science, Technology, Industrial Production, Urbanization) of new ways of living (Individualism, secularisation, Instrumental rationality) and new forms of malaise (alienation, meaninglessness, a sense of impending social dissolution)". There is a philosophical strand behind these processes. Max Weber (1930) identified the philosophical strand behind European Modernity as the "rationalisation of the world". Rationalisation means that the values in the social world are now determined by reason, not emotions or tradition, as earlier. Man can know the world through reason and change the world through Modernity's social thought. Due to this rationalisation process, the acceptance of some degree of disenchantment with nature happened in the West. In other words, the world view of separation between man and nature became the dominant one and got institutionalised in western countries. However, this kind of historical change did not happen in India as in the West. In Indian social life, nature is present through cultural and religious values.

The second characteristic of the Indian environmental movements is the origin and growth of environmental movements with the socio-ecological movements in India. In a way, they are addressing environmental concerns and the questions of equality and justice. Even with limited resources, the environmental movements have initiated a new political struggle to safeguard the interests of the poor and the marginalised, including women, tribal groups, and peasants (Karan, 1994). These movements have different standpoints. Some are Gandhian, some liberal, and some address the Marxist notion of class. However, all these movements "shared perception of natural resources as finite, and at risk from modernity's material and social technologies." (Freeman, 1999). All these movements address the environmental question with social questions. If we take the case of the Narmada movement, we can see the question of livelihood and survival.

Moreover, there is questioning against a mainstream model of development. There are certain cultural connotations too. Adivasis do not consider land as a commodity or private property. They considered the forest as the mother forest. In the case of Kudankulam, this plurality of standpoints existing within an environmental movement could be found. The question of security, fishing, livelihood and survival are found in the anti- Kudankulam movement. Concern about the sea and nature's balance is also raised in this movement. In all these issues, different ways of looking at nature are present. We cannot strictly classify these movements as Eco-centrist or anthropocentric because these movements carry multiple positions within a movement. The third is the origin and development of Indian environmental movements through negotiations with the state. Most Indian environmental movements formed either against the state or achieved their demands. Compared to western societies, the state has a very influential role in Indian society. According to Sudipta Kaviraj, State is "central to the story of Modernity in India. It is not merely one of the institutions that Modernity brings with it, for all institutions come through the State and its selective mediation" (Kaviraj, 2011, p. 45). When the state becomes a facilitator for development, the critical concerns of environment protection and society are sidelined.

The Internal Constraints

The Neoliberal state in India is well aware of the peculiarities of Indian environmental movements even before environmental movements could understand themselves. In the neoliberal economy, the state uses these weaknesses of environmental movements as a weapon against them. The first and foremost peculiarity and failure of the environmental movements in India is the inability to create a separate discourse on environmental politics in India. For example, the necessity to protect the environment is in the popular consciousness of the Indian masses. There are discourses about environmental movements in tradition and romantic pieces of literature (Guha, 1992). The need to protect the environment. However, the environmental movements in India failed to capitalise on such concerns of the masses. The state is well aware that the mentality towards nature, as compared to the West, is different in India. The

neo-liberal state understands this and develops new strategies to manipulate this concern. The state gave much importance to nature through rhetoric and advertisements. Speeches of leaders and their campaigns also laid their concerns about nature. Even while emphasising environmental concerns, structural programmes are implemented according to the plans of the neoliberal state and for the corporates (Joseph, 2007). The environmental movements in India remained mere spectators in this scenario.

The inability to produce a politics of its own has been the second internal constraint associated with the peculiarity of Indian Environmental movements. Unfortunately, this led to the dependence of Indian environmental movements on social movements and other identity movements as they could not survive in their capacity (Baviskar, 2011). Environmental concerns were usually raised with the issues related to land, development, and displacement. So environmental movements could not produce a political discourse for the sake of the environment. As mentioned earlier, environmental movements are associated with other social questions, which was one of the main features of the Indian environmental movement. However, this very characteristic has been the dilemma surrounding environmental movements. For any movement, it is essential to create a unique politics and language of its own. Environmental movements associated with social movements and other movements restrict the creation of a separate language. The environmental concerns always come under the politics of livelihood and survival questions. If we take the example of Indian feminist movements, it could be noticed that they could successfully develop their language for negotiation (Elshtain, 1982). As a result of this, later, mainstream politics could not ignore the politics of womanhood. Such peculiar politics and language for negotiation are absent in the case of environmental movements.

The state's separation of the survival and environmental question is the third reason behind the crisis of Indian environmental movements. This division is very strategic. Whenever the environmental movements address the environmental question, the state solely responds with the survival question. The State successfully implemented this strategy in the Narmada Bachao Andolan movement and the Kudankulam struggle. The state divides the social movement citing the survival and environmental question. To understand this division of survival question and environmental question by the state, we should understand the changing nature of the Indian State. The Nehruvian State and its promises ceased to exist after implementing economic reform policies. Since then, the Indian economy has been more inclined toward the philosophy of neoliberalism. Earlier notions of mixed economy and state-oriented welfare shifted to the capitalist economy and 'The New Politics of Welfare'. According to Jayal and Mehta (2011), "In theory, India's Great Transformation is founded on a social contract. We are told that the state's rationale for making way for the market and capital is growth generation. This growth, in turn, generates greater resources, which are then deployed by the state to prepare more citizens for participation in this growth or to help those who are unable to participate." Even though many scholars and data available show this 'new politics of welfare' is a failure, the popularity of this model is very high.

The state uses a much more sophisticated weapon against environmental politics- they are scientific committees. If an environmental question emerges, the state appoints a scientific committee to defend its position. If the scientific committee approves, the state declares its policies and programmes not to be harmful to nature. The state even uses force to get its programmes implemented. Nandigram violence by the State of West Bengal in 2007 and the Thoothukkudy massacre in the State of Tamil Nādu in 2018 are the best examples of state force against environmental and social movements. Since these two strategies were unsuccessful, the state popularised dividing social movements by distinguishing the environmental movements from the question of survival. Thus the inherent weaknesses of the Indian environmental movements, coupled with the strategic moves by the neoliberal state, led to the failure of Indian environmental movements.

Conclusion

Most of the literature about the environmental crisis in neoliberal India focuses on external pressures and state violence or the debate between environmental movements and the state. They are more concerned about external factors such as neoliberalism, global capital and multinational corporations. They failed to probe into the internal factors that led to the failure of environmental movements in India. This strategic

failure is also evident in understanding the crisis of environmental movements in India. The experience of Narmada Bachao Andolan and the People's Movement Against Nuclear Energy teach us that it is not only the neoliberal challenge from the state that caused the crisis of environmental movements in India, but some inherent theoretical positions and internal practical flaws also caused the 'existential crises' of contemporary environmental movements in India. Whatever is achieved through a movement, unless it does not affect state policy, the movement itself is said to be in a crisis. The main crises faced by the environmental movements in India are the inability to influence state policy or achieve their demands and the dearth of language to negotiate with the neo-liberal state. While the environmental movements lack theoretical clarity and practical strategies, on the other hand, the state has developed new strategies to counter challenges from environmental movements and civil society groups. In other words, the state is more equipped with a new language and clarity to communicate with people about the execution of liberal policies. But the environmental movements, with their weak power of language for negotiation and lack of clarity in their vision, have led to their downfall. Hence environmental movements need to develop a language of their own to negotiate with neo-liberal economies and states. The environmental movements should create new strategies to counter neo-liberal policies of the state that will enrich the democratic experience in India.

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