



Questions Of Environmental Justice In Kamala Markandaya's The Coffe Dams

Dr. M. Angkayarkan Vinayakaselvi¹, R.Abinaya²

¹Associate Professor of English, Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli – 620 024. Email id: avs@bdu.ac.in

²Junior Research Fellow, Department of English, Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli- 620 024. Email id: abinayarenganathan@gmail.com

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Abstract:

The article aims to evaluate the impacts of dam construction among the varied intersections of the society as represented in select Indian discourse to elaborate the aim. The article examines the following impacts on the indigenous people – displacement, structural and environmental justice in Kamala Markandaya's The Coffe Dams. In a post-colonial state as India – the rapid and unassuming introduction of technology-induced industrialisation and free market has contributed to the creation of the consumption based production economy. This is in contrast to the sustainable communal economy of the indigenous society which was conventional of India. Moreover, the complementary westernised knowledge and thought system had replaced the traditional knowledge system. The former influenced technocratic development and thus, encouraged the multi-purpose dam projects – as it was considered as the major milestone as a developmental model in India.

Keywords: Dam construction; The Coffe Dams; Environmental justice; Structural injustice; Displacement.

Introduction:

In India, government accelerated dam construction timeline has created numerous repercussions towards Indian environmentalism. The construction of multi-purpose dam has led way to large scale deforestation, displacement without any proper compensation or rehabilitation process. The structural injustice was infused in each one of the stages of construction including the labourers. The question of the destruction of dam weighing over its benefits persists, in addition accounting to slow violence on the indigenous people and the environment.

Dam construction was widely acknowledged and promoted in the post-independence period. It was seen as a means of connecting India to the developed nations. Technocratic development and free market was encouraged throughout the country. Swain points out how Nehru commissioned around 160 large dam to support the agricultural production increase of the First Five-year plan. The multipurpose dam projects thus, supported the increasing industrialisation, agricultural growth and urbanisation on the one hand,

Email id: avs@bdu.ac.in

while on the other hand, the consequence of these projects impacted negatively on the marginalised group of people who were shadowed for the cause of “The Greater Good” (Roy 1999). With increasing demand in agricultural growth and modernisation, multipurpose dams were constructed to satisfy intense irrigation and industrial needs. Moreover, many environmental disasters are caused as result of dams, such as, floods, drought, water-logging, salinity, siltation, land-slides due to fast floods and deforestation. Enormous amount of indigenous people were displaced of their land, culture and lifestyle as a result of these huge projects. This “massive population displacement” (Swain 824) consisted majorly of marginalised tribal people. The rehabilitation process or the compensations were either low or none. Within the redistribution of land for the displaced people, discrimination based on class, caste, and gender prevails, making most of the people, unwanted refugees seeking a place to live.

The article points out that the consequences of the impacts of the dam construction fall on the indigenous people. The compensation and rehabilitation is leaned towards the privileged people to the contrary. Moreover the marginalised people are denied of any benefits which the project promotes. The working class or the strategic middle class lay in between, and they experience equivalent injustice and hierarchal discrimination as a labour force and beneficiaries of the project. The article establishes multipurpose dam project in the societal and geographical positions, stating the magnitude of the issue as represented in Kamala Markandaya’s *The Cofferdams*. Thus, it calls of significant attention from the government and non-governmental organisations towards the sustainable development and retribution of the benefits to the indigenous people accordingly.

The Cofferdams captures the displacement of the tribal people and how indifferent the entire process remained. The dam construction site was occupied and utilised with the order of the government but the site of the bungalow in the upriver was taken away from the tribal settlements. Clinton was an English builder who won the contract of building the coffer dams in the hillside area where a dam construction was commissioned. He came with his company workers and his wife for the construction process. The novel begins after their settlement and process of the construction. Helen was a young woman whose interest leaned towards the indigenous people. Clinton’s reply to Helen’s findings of pottery pieces in their compound was that the displacement was a “little episode” (Markandaya 23) and they took the land just because they need it. This was not a big concern for the tribal people too as they said they moved when they were forced to move without any resistance. These could not be called as their domain as they were displaced just like that. The construction of cultural and social hierarchy was conditioned within the system to the extent that it was naturalised. Helen wondered about the potteries that “It had been part of some woman’s life once, not very long ago: she had filled it with water and scoured it, cooked in it and fed her family – the earthenware was pebble-smooth from use”. She realised that a whole community was displaced “persuaded to move” (Markandaya 24) and she knew it would be little more than an episode. Her butler Das who is not a foreigner could not explain this incident as he came from the plains and took proud in it, disclaiming the hill people, as if they were from a different country. She tried to convince Bashiam and the indigenous people by stating that the land belonged to them and they were persuaded and had all reason to protest. They were reluctant as they knew that various factors both natural, man-made wearied the people from protesting. They could not see the immediate impact as they got employment and they were convinced that the dam was more important.

The place and the construction site belonged to the dominance of man. Markandaya points that “There were no women here either. It was no place for women” (6) and “It was a MAN’S TOWN” (Markandaya 1) interfering how men played the wider part in the construction project by means of framing or implementation while on the other hand the workers went into the jungles to reach their

home where women lived with the sustainable environment and waiting to bear the burden of the after-effects of the developmental projects.

After the displacement, the condition of the people became comparatively poor, the children were playing in the dust along with the household cattle of all kind. Helen took the role of a host and she played with the children, rubbed flea powder into the dogs' yellow coats, watched the crops grow, she watched men and women at work. She was astonished by the way the people were living together in such small spaces vulnerable to smaller environmental disturbances like thunderstorm. The difference could be recounted over the "the primitive patches of surface-root crops of a community with one harvest in mind, rather than the recurrent cycle of growth: the haphazard clearing, overshadowed by encroaching forest: on these impermanent, flyaway foundations, whole people built whole lives" (Markandaya 39).

The indigenous people could not do anything due to the fast encroachment of the forests the forests as which the people depended once. The dam construction has offered them with daily wages without any kind of benefits. They cannot fish in the river due to the restrictions over the constructions. The people chose money over the forest based lifestyle. The tribal chief did not like the change in their settlements. The people were changing buying necessities from the camp shops which are susceptible to the forest ecosystem. He affirmed that "but before that they will learn what is real and mourn what is lost. A score or more before they bend the river... the Great Dam will take them, the man-eater will have its flesh" (Markandaya 72). The construction site created enormous amount of noise with the blasting which created trembling of physical structures around. As a response, Helen asked the tribal people if they could move but the village chief explained that their livelihood depended on the river and in the downstream the river banks were filled with buildings and the upstream was prone to heavy southwest monsoon winds; moreover, "Physically speaking no further retreat was left. So they stayed where they were, while the bed of the valley quaked, and dust flew through the thatch on their ramshackle huts and settled grittily in every nook and cranny" (Markandaya 107). This shows the lack of proper compensation or resettlement and rehabilitation process. The indigenous people had to face "social and economic inequalities ... destroying the environment, displacing and impoverishing people dependent on land" (Asthana 96).

Construction of the Coffer Dams:

Clinton had planted flags along the line where the plan of his construction would unfold. Around two thousand men and ten thousand tons of equipment had been assembled to tame the river, they planned to build the dam two hundred feet under the river bed, and in order for his plan to move on, "he had first to alter the river course, block its flow at the upstream coffer dam and deflect the rising waters into a channel cut to a point north of the downstream coffer where the river would resume its natural flow" (Markandaya 29) and there the main dam would be constructed. They were at the preliminary phase of the three stage operation plan, though there was not much trouble, Clinton was told that Helen had been speaking with the displaced people of the site about how dangerous the dam was and they need to know about this. The waste disposal trucks that carried the debris of the daily blasting were not properly maintained and managed. The construction site neither have any assistance for waste management and processing nor did the construction company instructed the indigenous people about the detrimental impacts. The people were neglected in the process and they are left to face the impacts without any assistance.

Another major threat of dam construction is human casualties. There were many accidents as a result of the construction, "the scream of brakes, the crash, and the jangling ricochet of heavy metal bouncing off jagged rock" (110). Mackendrick had seen the casualties of war and those whose death

bore obelisks, but these also were the casualties of peace who died without any memorials. "They died horribly, some of them. He had seen men chopped to pieces by their own machines, fished out suppurating from chemical vats, electrocuted, strung up against the high-tension cables like burntwood effigies, crumbling to cinder when the current was cut" (Markandaya 110). If they were British worker they were buried in the cemetery which was the replica as if in their home country. For ash was shattered in the river after the cremation ritual.

During the construction, the barges were working fine, while the sieves had problems with them. Jackson had reported intermittent jamming on the machines and Bailey and Wilkins were working on the flaps inside the cone, while Wright was by the controls. As Rawlings saw them, the Rotors began to turn and the two men fell beneath the rim of the cone. "Two of them, farthest from the outfall, jumped clear; two others, flung in the river by the impact, escaped with their lives... Unmanned, the laden barge began to swing with the current, taking with it the two men clinging to the cringle ropes, until a quirk in the flow lodged it momentarily in the offshore sludge a few yards from the crowd that had collected" (Markandaya 115). Wright who was in the controls in the machine could not stop his tears by seeing the horrid sight, which made Rawlings angry calling him a bastard to show his weakness in front of the Indian labourers.

Everyone was worried that the barge would sink in the waters. Though Krishnan sneered and complained, Rawlings did not mind. Every one of them had their own opinions while Bashiam and Smith worked to rescue the people who were drowned under the command of Rawlings. The body of Wilkins and Bailey was found close together as they had fallen, crushed and suffocated to death.

The others - well, they were not Christians, their faith was whole and deep, not strewn in fragments. They feared death too, who didn't; but they didn't scuttle sideways at the very sound of the word, they composed themselves and waited, like that desiccated headman in the village. Perhaps the hills bred that kind of courage, he thought, and machines manufactured their own special brand. (Markandaya 119)

Despite the accidents Clinton was concerned over finishing the coffer Dams as the monsoon began. The headman in the tribal settlement observed all the things around him. He could tell sense that things were changing around. "He knew about the rain, and the rise of the river, each day accelerating... the plight of the lowlanders who had come up the hill on the trail of money. He saw the dust from the dams like ash on his tribesmen's faces, and the growing neglect of the village as more and more of his men were sucked in" (Markandaya 150). As the rains were catching up, Clinton wanted Mackendrick to recruit as many as labourers as possible and as the plains were out of question due to the monsoon, he turned to the tribes who were seen as the cheap source of labour.

The dam was about to be finished, and many people came to watch the spectacle which was grand. They could see the twin dams which let the river pass through its narrow path across to allow the construction. The workers thought about the naming and left it to Mackendrick. He and Clinton knew the end result which could be dangerous and thus, decided to leave it to the people who would stay there to decide. They said that it would be a few more days and Mackendrick continued "How many hundred deaths can there be in that time that have not already happened? Besides there are warnings" (Markandaya 163) and Clinton could only reply that accidents are inevitable.

The work continued with the monsoon led to further accidents. The indigenous labourers who worked at the front were the major victims in which "Forty human beings, less two who marinated in the river, at the upstream section of the dam" (168). Clinton reasoned the dead by saying that the signals were not working efficiently and it was a premature blast. The inquiry would inform properly but there

is no adequate time, said Mackendrick. The demised were assembled along the bank. The count was thirty eight and among them ten were British while the rest was “theirs” (169). The other two were struck which everyone felt would delay the work. Clinton thought about the next course of action as he saw the dead, “but now was halted. By the corpses of foolish men, who lay on the rocky bed, pinned by the rock boulder, their limbs flowing with the tide though attached to the trunk. Waving like seaweed, or the pale tentacles of some hindering fate” (Markandaya 170). The human causalities were visible in the text and it is representative of the detrimental impacts of dam construction. On the other hand, the invisible violence impacted on the flora and fauna has not been visibly represented.

Landscape:

The portrayal of the landscape is used to the contradictions in the hierarchy. For the British officials and workers from the plains, the night in the forest was entirely different “The jungle crept back, closing in as the shadows of the huge trees fell across the line where the clearing merged into scrub, and advanced and deepened;...the yelp of jackals, or the soft furtive sounds of frightened deer” (5-6). Beyond the Clinton lines, 500 yards upstream there was a British workers’ quarters build by the Indian contractors according to the models of Clinton, which made him wonder if it was a bit of England housing estate here. According to his orderly temperament they “carried their Englishness into the jungle” (5) with the gardens and gravelled paths and boulders in contrast to the wilderness around. The luxuries depended on the hierarchal structure. For example, to make their travel easy Clinton had brought a Ferrari 500 which waited in the Madras Harbour till Mackendrick finish building the roads. He also completed the bridge and the bungalow across the river each separated by trees. “Nothing short of wholesale destruction would have charmed woodland out of this jungle, but the best that could be had been done, the trees lopped and trimmed, the rank lush undergrowth singed to ground level” (Markandaya 7).

Bashiam being the native felt peace in listening since birth and he was unconsciously alert to the sounds of any change being experienced living there. It was not same for Jackson who could not sleep well with the sound that penetrated his room unlike the day. For Lefevre, the river was about the sand, rocks that dwelt in the river beds, before everything could start he stayed there researching the stills and overlooking the indigenous standards and establishing hegemony. Clinton slept and dreamt of the river and woke up with a roar of it and he was always soothed by the idea of the dam.

Structural injustice among the dam workers

The project for the construction of the dam in the forest area was drafted and processed in the country’s capital with the people who were clearly from the mainland while the actual project was to happen on the hills. The tender was obtained by the British company Clinton and Mackendrick and the two were the in charge of the project. The British workers including the supervisors and the labourers dominated the hierarchy after Clinton and Mackendrick. The latter was sent first to set up the base camp and housing units for the workers and the bungalows for the British officials. They were for the key men of Clinton, Bob Rawlings, the Chief engineer; Henderson, the turbine specialist; and the team headed by Lefevre that ran the soil mechanics laboratory; Todd who was the electric wizard; Galbraith, the chief technical man and his corps of assistants and Mackendrick. Ironically, the construction of those units were built by the Indian contractors who comparatively did a better job; the ceiling of the canteen showed cracks due to the blasting and the excessive rain and the workers blamed the Indian contractors, only to realise that this part of the construction was their finishing while Subramaniam’s works were fine.

The hierarchy was visible, “The officers and their wives. The technicians, the subordinate cadre. The men” (32). The native labours were left at the pressed down by these categories. All of them were afraid though proud about the uncertainty that laid there in the hills. Clinton was uninterested about the workers and Helen was curious and unsure of identification. Their opinions ensured “the impossibility of decent relations between the races” (Markandaya 33). Millie always tried to convince Helen to participate in the ritual entertainment of the rich wives but she was reluctant and said she had to go to the villages which interested her more. Millie was offended when Helen answered her that she may try visiting natives, as she was against the idea of the natives and the country.

The Indian officials were once again from the mainland including majority labourers while the indigenous labourers were less. This is questionable as the project was designated for the benefit of the people and the distinction of region is visible in the fraction of the benefits. The local people were used more in number only when the project was to be hurried and the risk of death and accidents were more. The labour benefits were comparatively low for them and in one incident; a mistake happened due to the untimely flow of oil and the origin of the problem was not found. Clinton could not blame his own workers as they were well trained and thus, he fired the coolies who could be replaced anytime. The more impacted labourers were at the bottom of the hierarchy which was based on race, region, class and caste. Similar to the front line soldiers who were blasted first in the war, the accidents in the construction site had its front workers. Mackendrick points out they were the casualties of peace on contrast to the casualties of war those whose death bore obelisks while the former is without any memorials. The rescue operation after the accident in the barges, everyone had different opinions and Rawlings wanted to get the body of Bailey. They were given a funeral but there were many more whose body was not considered of equal value to be taken out for funeral. They were mostly the indigenous tribal people whose deaths were equally indifferent as their life.

The character Bashiam was rather conservative as he did not have his formal education, he was well versed in the traditional knowledge of the forests and out of his curiosity learned more things about electricity, machines and so on. He was not convinced by the curiosity as he had seen what a cyclone could do but also knows the importance of planning. Being a tribesman, he was distant from the other Indians who called him “jungly wallah”. Bashiam could feel that though he was not far below in his position, but the modern commitment had diminished his significance as Clinton’s thoughts were different; “No modern project could advance if one had first to allay every tribal anxiety: nor did he feel disposed to exert himself to sway a minority of one” (Markandaya 19). The accident of Bashiam was a clear compromise of the safety standards for the benefit of the construction. Jackson almost revealed the truth to Helen that Clinton didn’t inform Bashiam about the problem in the indicator. Bashiam had to work to rescue the bodies of the labourers who drowned due to the monsoon and the impatience towards completing the dam (26). Forty people were dead due to an untimely blasting and the bodies of 38 members were assembled by the banks, out of which ten were British and the majority rest were “theirs” (Markandaya 169) – the indigenous people. Two of the corpses were left waiting for the discussion if to cement them under or taken out of the depths. The tribal headman came to inquire about the death and urged to get the two bodies back. He was encouraged by Krishnan who wanted to get his share of leader prospects being always second in hierarchy to the British officials. Thus, a strike was started over the two dead bodies. The contrast is visible when Krishnan opposed rescuing the corpses of the two English workers over saving the barge and how the latter were indifferent over the corpses of the tribal people. All the while the victims were the labourers who were inferior in the social strata regardless of the race. Krishnan’s intention was socio-political chaos to boast his upper hand to the British whom he antagonised for his inferior treatment.

The character of Krishnan is the typical representation of the government official who claims power not only based on the job they hold but also the region, class and caste they belong. His superiority in the narrative *Coffer Dams* was challenged by the British and that triggered and led to maintain persistent animosity. He led the Indian officials and was brushed off often by Clinton over the decision in the construction. He questioned Clinton's awareness of the region and the natural disasters like cyclones and so on, but Clinton provided a decade worth of statistical data. The concept of knowledge was entirely built upon the western philosophical thought which relied dominantly on data and evidences while readily ignoring anything otherwise. The knowledge of the indigenous people gathered over generations is based on observation and experiences should be taken into account making it a part of the official decision making system. The inclusive interaction with the tribal or indigenous knowledge is one of the possible measures towards sustainable development. In any developmental project only the "vulnerable population face what are arguably the most severe consequences of dam construction projects" (Vancleef 350)

Neoliberalism and Globalisation:

The reasoning given by the authorities of the Indian government as they welcomed Clinton can be seen as the representative debate of the encouragement of neoliberalism and development thoughts that were popular during the post-colonial period right after the independence. They said that "the turbulent river that rose in the lakes and valleys of the south Indian highlands and thundered through inaccessible gorges of its hills and jungles down to the plains with prodigal waste" and that the people by the river were called as wary as they were affected by either extreme drought or flood and accepted everything as their fate. Markandaya refers to them as the "planners of the new India" (3) as they boasted about their technical advisers and their facts. The Indian officer, Krishna though participated in the tender were not convinced of its importance as he just left these issues to Mackendrick about the approvals from either Delhi or Madras. He even commented that let the project go to the Russians or Americans or the Swedes but was eager as this would test his limits against the natural hazards. He was also instigated as many foreigners wanted which finally he got as his partner worked out in India while he was in London in two years.

Conclusion:

The indigenous people are dependent on the natural resources and the ecosystem around them. Considering our socio-cultural setup, women are the most affected and less considered in any scenarios of environmental based issues. Reddy discusses how "the tribal people are socially excluded from the mainstream society" (507). Swain states that the idea of benefitting the masses while destroying the indigenous rights towards natural resources should be changed by the government considering sustainable forms of development including all people. The natural resources should be used for the local indigenous people while limiting or balancing the exploitation. All over the world a few targeted ecosystem are exploited based on the idea that it is for the greater good, which equates the indigenous people as disposable who are mostly marginalised by caste, class and creed. They have to bear the burden of the privileged few who reap the benefit.

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