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Ecological problems in rural Indian communities

topics:

- *people in rural South India facing ecological problems*

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Introduction

India is known for her ancient cultures and temples. In recent decades, India is known for her atomic bomb explosions and huge industrialisation process. The understanding of progress, development and growth was defined only in terms of material production since the 1950s. Consecutive economic revolutions such as Green, White, Blue and Grey Revolutions witness to such growth models as well as ecological degradation.

Mega Dams like Sardar Sarovar Dam on the Narmada river, have become the modern shrines of India. Nuclear plants, satellites, missiles and atom bombs are considered to be the prestigious modern symbols of India. This sort of growth indirectly tells us that there is over exploitation of land, water, minerals, ores and creation of enormous waste. The industrial production of rayon, synthetic fibre, leather, chemicals, energy, and motor cars have contaminated the soil and the atmosphere. The disposal of waste plastic bags has become a daily problem to most of the Municipal Corporations.

The situation in Madurai City

Madurai is called the Temple City and in 1336 became the capital of the Pandiyas after Pandian, a feudal king. Today it has become an industrial city. Madurai district alone has 1452 primary schools, 349 middle schools, 138 high schools, 112 higher secondary schools, 25 arts colleges, one medical college, one agricultural university and many engineering colleges. The Literacy rate is 63.72%.

It has only one river known as the Vaigai River, which has a lot of religious connections to it. This Vaigai River except in rainy days has a very narrow amount of water flow. Therefore water shortage is very frequent in the City. If we study the problem deeply, we may come to understand how cities have neglected traditional water sources and solely depended on external solutions.

In and around the city, 25 traditional water collection ponds existed. Now only a few ponds are left untouched and the rest of them have been filled and made into housing plots, government offices, play grounds, bus stations, radio station, auditoriums etc. The average rainfall is 887mm and so it is a necessary to collect this rain water in these water collection ponds in order to raise the ground water level.

The ground water level has been going down because of two reasons - one is the rain water is not collected in ponds but runs off with effluent water and is contaminated. Secondly the ground water is over exploited without any controls. The private companies and individuals go as deep as possible with bore wells and take ground water to the maximum for their own use.

The City Corporation has only now realized the seriousness of this kind of absence of regulation. They are trying to find some solutions to collect and retain rainwater in and around every new house. This attempt also fails to impress the people because of non-observance of the rules.

There are local ecological groups who are trying to make some serious efforts to collect and retain rainwater through small collection ponds. Our Seminary took some serious effort to improve ground water level and has succeeded with the help of its students.

Now our Seminary has enough water for both domestic use and the irrigation of bananas and coconuts. Our Seminary also encourages incoming people as well as the local people not to use plastic bags but to switch over to cotton bags. We have succeeded in getting the government to pass a law banning plastic bags.

The case of a specific village: Parambupatti

It is a village situated next to Madurai Airport with good fertile land producing jasmine flowers, onions, chillies, green gram, brinjals, dhal etc. But the failure of the monsoon rains for the last two years has affected agricultural production.

Nearly 1000 people of one caste live there. This village has one primary school with 3 teachers. Today the village is undergoing several problems, apart from monsoon failure. The main problems are: (1) The new ring road; (2) The airport extension; (3) The huge irrigation canal.

(1) *Ring Road* – It is a 50ft by-pass road to link Madurai City with different ports and exporting zones, cutting across the village. This ring road has become a 24 hours busy road producing much noise, destroying the calmness of the typical village. The people have lost their agricultural land without any compensation from the Government. The number of accidents involving humans and cattle is increasing.

(2) *Airport Extension* – Since Madurai City has been increasingly playing an important role in industrial and commercial activities, the State government of Tamil Nadu is trying to promote the Madurai airport into an International airport. The extension is planned exactly over 20 acres of agricultural land where deep wells, houses and gardens are situated. Everyday airport authorities and revenue officials are coming and measuring the village without giving exact information about their plan and rehabilitation to the people. The people are divided over this issue for the last 5 years, whether to fight or not.

(3) *New Irrigation Canal* – It is true that the village people need more irrigation facilities than existing ones, but the government policies are promoting new installations which undermine local traditional systems. The village ponds and waterways are neglected but the state plans big irrigation canals flowing outside which will ultimately take away rainwater from the villages. The new canal which is 20 metres in width and has high walls built over the remaining agricultural land of the village. The compensation for this canal land is Rs.30 per cent against the market value of Rs. 1000.

Other impacts upon the people

(1) Employment

The overall life of the people in this village is at stake. The farm activities are slowly coming to an end due to water shortage. As the agriculture does not provide hope, the villagers start to despair of it and compare it unfavourably with other works. Many move away to work in well digging and water collection pond deepening elsewhere. The young people go for carpentry that is entirely new work, but it gives regular employment, good payment, extra benefits like travel, tea etc.

The Women go into the knitting industry in the neighbouring towns. Thus agriculture slowly becomes an employment of poor esteem. The middle class suffers mostly due to their loss of status. They do not have enough work and are not willing to change their caste status to work in other occupations.

(2) Arrival of Money Lenders

The new phenomenon of money borrowing is increased. The money Lenders are available at any time both, morning and evening in the village. They give Rs. 900 for six months and get Rs. 1000 from them. If the people can't pay the money on time, the money lenders will resort to harassment. Thus there is a growing debt crisis in the village, particularly in the section who find difficulty in finding employment.

(3) Shop Keepers

The settlers from neighbouring villages installed few shops at this village which thrive. The local villagers do not have this profit making skill compared with the new trading community. The shop keepers bring mineral water, soft drinks, hair tonics, perfumes etc. which are new to their culture. The shop keepers encourage the people who consume such products and sarcastically humiliate those who do not consume them. However the lack of ethical trading practices amongst the villagers indirectly helps others. The hard earned money is spent on new consumerist goods without any critical outlook.

(4) Entertainment

Local group games are slowly vanishing but cricket gains popularity. Cable TV decides and motivates people towards a new consumerist culture. The hard earned money is spent on domestic gadgets and luxury products. Fashionable dress wear-

ing is growing and the traditional dhobis (washermen) now demand a piece rate for washing whereas in the old days they bartered for an annual share of the grain harvests.

On the whole, despite new problems, the involvement of money in the village increased without creating any improvement in their livelihood. No higher education, no new houses, no savings but the money flow is carried away by the modern consumer products.

This sort of village problems ends up with people's migration to urban areas. The migrated villagers live in urban slums and lose their village identity once for all. Ultimately they lose their roots for they are neither accepted by the urban people nor have they any employment in their own villages.

Alternative attempts

The Parambupatti villagers do not simply watch over the incidents but many times they have met among themselves and discussed strategies. They conducted demonstrations in front of the Collector's Office (The Collector is equivalent to a "Prefect" in France, and has the legal and financial responsibility for the District), met the members of the Parliament of the Union of India and local Legislative Assembly of the State of Tamil Nadu. The people have conducted awareness programmes among villagers about the airport extension. So they are struggling to combat such policies and demand new land both for farming and housing. The struggle continues.

Some of the lands of this area have been newly reclaimed with Social Forestry Schemes. There, with the support of Rural Theological Institute, fruit trees – sapodillas, pomegranates and mangos are planted by providing two bore wells. The Landholders meet one third of the cost of the total expenses.