

“Thirst for the Poor, *Thanda* for the Affluent”

Protest Against Coke at Kerala’s Plachimada

○ Shakuntala Narasimhan

Ambika, 28, is the mother of two school-going children. She is a farm labourer eking out a living on daily wages of Rs 40. On June 8, 2003, the police arrested her; her blouse was ripped and her gold chain *thali* (*mangalsutra*) was snatched and broken. It has still not been returned to her. She received *lathi* blows on her stomach. No women police were present during her arrest. And her crime? She was protesting against the functioning of the Hindustan Coca-Cola Beverages Factory in her village, Plachimada, near Palakkad in Kerala state. This factory is guzzling over half a million litres of water per day for its bottling plant operations, causing a drastic fall in groundwater levels in the region, leading to severe shortages of drinking water.

The Coke company also sold waste sludge from its factory to farmers in the area as ‘fertiliser’, which was reported to contain toxic cadmium, lead and other harmful ingredients. As part of the villagers’ ongoing demand for the closure of the factory, Ambika and some others placed blobs of sludge before the factory gates. A posse of policemen,

deployed there to protect the factory, rounded up over 140 protestors and hauled them to the police station. She was one of seven women admitted to the Palakkad district hospital for treatment for injuries.

“Before the factory was set up in 1999, we were using the water from the village well for drinking, cooking

and washing. Since the year 2000, the water has started smelling foul and also tastes bitter. If we drink it we feel nauseated. I also developed scalp irritation after I washed my hair in the local water. So now we all have to walk over three kilometers daily to fetch water from outside,” says Kunjamma, one of the residents of Plachimada.

Most of the men and women here are daily wage earners working as farm labourers. If they spend two to three hours fetching water from afar, they cannot go to work and if they do not go to work they have nothing to buy food with. It is either wages or water – and they need both, to survive.

Nayagam is nine months pregnant. Her first child Kavya developed skin rashes last year, and the doctor said it could be because of contaminated water used for bathing. The medicine he prescribed cost Rs 50 that the family could ill afford. Now Nayagam is scared to bathe, lest her unborn child gets affected. In her advanced stage of pregnancy, she is unable to fetch water from outside. Her husband Kalichami hence has to make two to four trips to haul pots of water for the family’s



Little Kavya, among the many, who developed skin rashes due to contaminated water.



A giant dummy of a Coke bottle burnt in protest

drinking and cooking needs. On days when he goes for water, he cannot go to work. “It will cost us Rs 350 to take my wife to the hospital for her delivery, I do not know where the money will come from,” he says. This, then, is the “development” that the community has seen following the setting up of a multinational bottling plant in their village. Where once they eked out a living as small farmers, now the severe scarcity of water, due to the appropriation of huge quantities for the factory’s needs, has made farming impossible, and families are running into debt. Even *dal* does not cook in the local well water, due to high mineral concentration (caused by fall in groundwater levels), which means that the community’s nutritional intake gets further diminished.

In the name of “promoting foreign direct investment” and export earnings, Coke in fact gets tax concessions since “mega corporations” that bring in foreign investment of over Rs 100 crore qualify for exemptions from sales and entry tax, under the special

dispensation law of the Prime Minister’s Office (Indigenous brands pay 16 per cent sales tax).

The factory management claims that the water shortage is not caused by Coke but due to drought. Farmer Shahul Hameed, retorts, “I have seen many years of drought, but the water never smelled or tasted so foul. It is not just draining and depletion of groundwater but its contamination by the effluents discharged by the factory that is ruining our lives,” he adds.

Following widespread complaints and distress, the *panchayat* passed a resolution on April 7, 2003, demanding closure of the bottling plant. Two village wells were also sealed because of the dangerously poor quality of the water. Coke continued operations, disregarding the *panchayat*’s order. The Court ordered the State government to report back on the controversy, but the authorities sat on it for four months, so the residents have been sitting in *dharna* in front of the factory gates, from 6 AM to 5 PM.

“We are all foregoing our wages for the day when we sit here in protest, but nevermind, we will not give up the fight. What is the use of

slogging from dawn to dusk for Rs 40, if we cannot even have drinking water to slake our thirst at the end of a day’s work?”, Mailamma, one of the locals, says. The protestors are surviving on donations of cash and rice from sympathisers. Some take turns sitting on *dharna*, and make a day’s (insufficient) earnings stretch to last for three days, “because we will not give up the struggle for justice, whatever the price we have to pay,” as Daivatha declares.

Daivatha also adds that she fed her five-year-old child Coke, believing that “if it is a product from America, it has to be good”. The child’s teeth have rotted because of the high acidic content of the fizzy drink. She too, sits by the roadside hut with her child beside her, as part of the *dharna*, braving rain and sun. Beside them lies a six-foot long “effigy” of a Coke bottle, painted over with a skull-and-bones symbol to signify what the factory has done to the people.

A community that was poor, now finds itself further impoverished, with even drinking water unavailable after the factory was set up. What little there is, has become unusable. And the world around is celebrating “The



Entrance to the Coke factory at Plachimada, Kerala

Year of Fresh Water". Greenpeace's report shows that against the WHO norms of 0.1 microgram per litre of lead, the water sample from around the Coke factory had 65.7 micrograms, and a cadmium contamination of 10 micrograms against the permissible level of 0.03. Farmer Krishnaswamy's family says that they suffer from the thick and foul smelling smoke that the factory emits. Since they live downwind, their plight is particularly bad. "We develop respiratory problems and the management sitting in air-conditioned offices does not care," he says. He also pulls up a handful of groundnut plants to show how the seeds have grown shrivelled and sparse due to soil contamination, where once they grew healthy and abundant.

"The villagers were told in 1999, that the factory would be good for the community, and that it would generate employment and incomes, Swaminathan, an Adivasi resident and an activist of the Coca-Cola Virudha Janakeeya Samara Samithi (Anti-Coke People's Struggle Committee) points out. The only "good" that the villagers have seen is increased distress, thirst, and poor crops. Krishnaswamy spent one lakh rupees in digging a 150-foot deep well, in an attempt to irrigate his coconut and groundnut crops. The soil, however, is so depleted by the rapacious operations of the factory and the discharge of effluents, that he now harvests only 200 coconuts where once he used to get 600.

As for employment generation, the majority of employees engaged by Coke are from outside Plachimada, and these workers are not affected by the water shortage. Worried that closure of the factory will mean losing their jobs, they are in fact staging along with the support of the factory management, a counter *dharna* in front of the *panchayat* office, protesting against the closure order. Closure will mean a loss of even the modest Rs 50-55 that they earn as daily wages from the factory.



Two of the women protestors on *dharna*

Poverty, then, prevents even a battle against the injustice of appropriating a basic resource like water for commercial profits, from garnering support. Coke spends crores of rupees on advertisements

and pays fabulous sums to get superstars like Aamir Khan to promote their product. The villagers have no resources to publicise their struggle. Even the state-owned Doordarshan television goes by earnings from sponsorship and advertising revenues, rather than with a concern for social justice, people's priorities or promoting healthy food habits. Coke shot into the news only after BBC Radio put out a programme on toxic waste in the Coke plant's effluents, and the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) of Delhi

released shortly thereafter, a test report saying that Cola drinks contained harmful pesticides.

School children around Plachimada have vowed to boycott Coke in condemnation of what it does to the environment and the community's quality of life, but metropolitan children (and adults) outside Kerala have largely shown indifference. Such is the awesome, insidious power of advertising.

Cola companies reportedly paid thirteen lakhs for short notice insertions in the papers to counter news reports about toxic waste and pesticide contamination. In contrast, activist film makers like K.P. Sasi

and C. Saratchandran spent from their pockets to finance the documentation of corporate malfeasance. They get no commercial "sponsors", not even from the State which swears by the right to information. As

Saratchandran points out in his documentary film, *“The Bitter Drink”*, 60,000 crates leave the factory daily to rake in profits for a company that repatriates huge profits out of the country and is “unlikely to provide any substantial gains in the country’s productive capacity in the long run”, according to the Public Interest Research Group of Delhi.

The Coke management has in fact registered a FIR at Chittur police station against the protesting villagers, accusing them of posing a threat to law and order. “It is the factory that has destroyed our peace and our lives,” Ambika retorts. This is the Company that wanted to enter the bottled water market in Chennai because “the quality of water available in the city is hardly fit for drinking”. There are profits to be made, even from dirty water and distress.

The factory is also accused of violating the Land Utilisation Act, by appropriating 34 acres for its plant. The Factories Act, too, has been violated, the villagers say. Against the four buildings that have to be in place by law (for packaging, treatment plant, production, etc.), the factory claims it has only one building, and pays tax only on one. Workers who helped build the factory also add that the plant is operating many more bore-wells than it has a sanction for.

To one side of the factory is a small dam. The water in this reservoir, the villagers tell me, usually overflows during the monsoons. All I see is a miserable puddle, skirted by dry banks. The groundwater is all gone, they tell me. On the other side, the factory’s compound wall shows a fresh cemented strip with barbed wire on top where the company has raised the wall’s height, “for protection” – protection



The boundary wall of the Coke factory raised to keep out protesters.

against a miserable bunch of poor, half hungry villagers who are demanding water to drink and survive.

Mega corporations have political backing (the latter cannot function without the former’s endorsement – again, money talks) and so we have the US Embassy asking for a “level playing field” and “fairness” in resolving the case against Coke. Thirsty, distressed villagers have no one to speak up for them, except for a few activists who get beaten up by the police. Also, mainstream media is only concerned with the “*masala*” elements of the test reports and the responses from the state pollution control boards, instead of the human dimensions of the “story”.

Kapil Sibal, the high profile lawyer representing Coke in court in the ongoing battle over pesticide content, argued in August 2003, that consumers will be denied their “right” to drink the product if the factory was ordered to close. Sibal is not unaware that consumers’ rights include the right to safety, health and information. And we, the educated and well-off, who know that Coke lacks nutrition, cannot be bothered to exercise our

rights as discerning consumers. “It will all blow over,” predicts an advertising professional (where would Coke or any multinational brand be, without ads?). “The adverse impact on sales will be temporary,” cynics agree. Which is, in fact, an indictment of our social apathy as much as that of the tardy responses of the pollution control boards, law enforcers and policy makers towards protecting citizen’s rights in terms of basic needs, health, safety and well-being.

After 480 days of struggle in which over 300 protestors have been arrested, 13 more activists were arrested on August 30, at Palakkad, when they held a peaceful demonstration in front of the Kerala Ground Water Board. The demonstration was organised by the People’s Union for Civil Liberties, Kerala to voice their protest against the inefficiency of the Board in tackling the groundwater problems created by Coca Cola Plachimada unit. “Coke has clearly contaminated the groundwater with toxic waste and the land with carcinogens, drained the aquifers, sold or donated toxic waste as fertilizer, served pesticides in their product, and lied at every stage,” the anti-Coke activists point out. The Union Health Minister’s report in Parliament also conceded that pesticide residue found was above the European Union norms in the majority of samples. However, it is the human rights violations of appropriation of natural resources like water by corporations with money, and the denial of basic needs to the community, that is the larger – and more worrisome – issue in this saga. Telegrams and letters of support may be sent to the Chief Minister of Kerala at chiefminister@kerala.gov.in □

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