

ANTI-DISPLACEMENT MOVEMENT AND DEVELOPMENT DEMOCRACY: A STUDY ON KEEZHATTUR PROTEST IN KERALA

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Abstract: India has a history of displacing people for ‘development’; its genesis can be traced to the colonial administration. The 1894 Land Acquisition Act proves how State and bureaucracy define the rights of the people displaced. The ideas of development always triumph over displacement, and both parliamentary discourse and State establishments are positioned in favour of development. Hence, an anti-displacement perspective is considered anti-development as well as anti-State. There are local-centric movements to oppose displacement which are mainly criticized for not taking into account the development interest at large. However, being local-centric is a strength of these movements as it accommodates grass root democracy. This paper discusses the issue of development democracy in the context of the local protest in Keezhattur, Kerala. It is a locally grounded movement against the land acquisition for a highway project. The government is for the project while the opposition parties are against it simply by virtue of being in the opposition. No political party in Kerala genuinely opposes the project. The movements are treated as against the development. The oppositional politics is local while the project is national. The people of Kerala do not have a reason to be with the protestors since the project is for a highway connecting the State with national mainland.

Keywords: Vayalkilikal, Keezhattur, development, resistance, displacement.

INTRODUCTION

Displacing people from their habitation and living environment has become a routine process in India. The problem is universal and not only limited to developing or third-world economies. India has a rich history of uprooting the social, economic and cultural base of people for “development” and “infrastructure”. Every displacement is justified by “development”, assuming that it will ensure a better world and life,

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which is untrue. Development does come across difficulties in ensuring better and sustainable alternatives to the people affected by it. As Thangaraj (1998) observed, World Bank-assisted development projects alone displaced 16.5 million people in India from 1950 to 1989, of which only 3.9 million people have been rehabilitated. Another study by Negi et al (2011) assessed that about 50 million people have lost their habitation for development projects during the last 50 years. In India, the practice of displacement for development projects began during the colonial period. Displacing traditional inhabitants from the forest for organised plantation was initiated by colonial forces and continued in the post-colonial system as well. Government is the most critical force in undertaking project and displacement in India. Indian government has been unable to frame any specific law to deal with displacement and rehabilitation. Many State governments follow the industrial rehabilitation policy to settle down the displaced people. Conceptually, they come under the UN Guidelines on Internally Displaced People (IDP). However, India has not accepted them as IDP; it treats this as an internal issue that does not need international treaties to be dealt with. The African Union drafted a bill that came into force in 2012: The Kampala Convention¹. The main objective of the convention was to “promote and strengthen regional and national measures to prevent or mitigate, prohibit and eliminate root causes of internal displacement as well as provide for durable solutions”. The agreement among African countries talks about possible measures to prevent displacement, but a similar happening is simply unimaginable in India. Displacement in India has led to total distress and the State has lost its democratic credentials to engage in a political dialogue with people. Penz (1997), explained that, displacement is an integral part of industrial development, no matter whether it is socialist system or capitalist system. The principle of public interest does not always define with reference to the interest of the people. It is generally build upon the assumption that acquisition would lead to “development” of people in a particular direction, such as becoming “civilized”. Michael (1995) defined development-induced displacement stating that “forced population displacement is always crisis-prone, even when necessary

as part of broad and beneficial development programs. It is a profound socio-economic and cultural disruption for those affected. Dislocation breaks up living patterns and social continuity. It dismantles existing modes of production, disrupts social networks, causes the impoverishment of many of those uprooted, threatens their cultural identity, and increases the risks of epidemics and health problems". Michael's concept of displacement is missing in the contemporary capitalist system. The impacts of displacement that Michael explains do not fit into the capitalist logic of displacement, hence resisting displacement is also considered as resisting development. Displacement and development need to be explained in a larger framework.

This paper discusses an anti-displacement movement in a local village in Kerala, India where the ruling left front government confront the opposition of anti-displacement activists who oppose a highway development project. The protestors also belong to the ruling party's political ideology and still oppose the project based on environmental reasons. It becomes a movement and able to articulate sustainable development within the local specific causes. The movement got wider attention since it is against the left parties and it is primarily a challenge for the left to defend their ideological position on dispossession. This paper discuss how idea of development democracy operate at the local level, how it articulate the right to oppose the state policies and how the parliamentary left politics articulate dispossession when they are in power.

METHODOLOGY/APPROACH OF THE STUDY

Conceptual framework

Displacement results into disagreement and resentment among those affected. As Simon (1997) argued, human development is a process of enhancing the individual and collective quality of life of the people. It has to follow a manner that ensures access to basic needs as a minimum, which is environmentally, socially and economically sustainable. If development is aloof from the public, it results in resentment. As Pieterse

(1998) argued, the concept of development should not be limited to GDP growth. Instead, human development should be given priority. Korten (1990: 67) stated: “Development is a process by which the members of a society increase their personal and institutional capacities to mobilize and manage resources to produce sustainable and justly distributed improvements in their quality of life consistent with their own aspirations”. The people have the right to oppose or show disagreement regarding a development project if it leads to wealth accumulation rather than distribution. The study by Vandergeest (2003) explains that the development is inherently a spatial activity and all development projects are meant to reorganize the meaning and control of space. Occupying space does not only mean physical displacement. It is also about development planning and policies undermining or constraining livelihoods. The present day developmental aspirations of periphery are directly dependent on the state’s political articulations of development. Ziebur(1992), argued that the nation state is not disappearing the current capitalist order, instead it is transforming its character and significance. Hirsch (1995), argued that, centralised and bureaucratized nation-state and global capitalism are interrelated. A centrally controlled nation state with strong bureaucracy provides some of the most basic condition for the establishment of delimited and strong capitalist economy. Jackman (1993), observed that, the people and their agents in a capitalist state never able to make substantial inroads on the established capital-nation state relationship.

The concept and practice of the nation State and neo-liberal State institutions create an organisational chaos in the public sphere. State has to adapt the character of a capitalist firm to survive and cater to the needs of the changing economy. State occupying public ‘space’ in a democracy always results in resentment that could manifest in various forms. The nature of opposition is depends on the expectations from the state. The case discussed in this paper is a manifestation of the resentment of the people who have a different level of expectation from the State. Klandermans and Oegema (1987) argued that the potential of a movement to mobilize people along with a larger social

group can be conceived of as the proportion of individual members of that society who are, in general, willing to support the movement. Gathering a mass is possible when the society deeply feels the need to organise themselves. Such a movement cannot always be considered as a “new social movement” although it acquires the characteristics of new social movements.

As Johnston, Larana and Gusfield (1994) explained, new social movements give importance to the socially constructed nature of grievances and the ideology rather than the people’s structural location. Plotke (1990) made an interesting observation that new social movements generally overstate their novelty and depict their goals as cultural, and often exaggerate their separation from conventional political life. These two observations reflect some of the most critical questions on the new social movements. New social movements have the freedom of articulating grievances within the very existence of individual life and of not necessarily being driven by any ideological explanation. It is also a fact that the success of a new social movement is dependent on its separation from conventional political movements. The existing method is not adequate to holistically understand the ideological and theoretical position of anti-displacement. Habermas’s (1984-87) explanation offers some more clarity on the issue and gives an ideological base to explain anti-displacement in the context of new social movements. He explained that new social movements can be defined as a defensive reaction to the colonizing intrusion of States and the market into the life world of the modern society. Thus, according to him, new social movements can be part of vital social transformation.

The ideological and conceptual framework in which the anti-State/government movements are located is significant. As Nilsen (2013) explained, social movements in the global south either take a post-structuralist approach or a State-centric approach. The post-structuralist approach is a collective response to the discourse of development which is a reassertion of subjugated traditions of knowledge in opposition to the modern knowledge. This approach can lead to a search for radically alternative ways of organizing social norms of satisfying needs. The State-centric approach can be treated as a collective agent

since it desires greater access to development. The opposition to displacement could be demonstrated as rejecting the idea of development itself. Ziai (2007: 9) analyzed the devastating consequences of development from the post-development perspective and attempted to explain the origin of resistance. Ziai argues that resistance and violence resulting from development are directly related to the disempowering impact of development projects. Resistance should be read as resentment against those who have the power to design development. Such movements could be local-centric and do not have any macro level impact on policies of development. These movements never go along with the party politics and often face difficulties in articulating the resistance within the parliamentary system. The study by Piazza (2011) gives an insight into the institutional, radical and antagonist left towards the land acquisition for development projects in Italy. The conflict between the left parties on development results shift within in the Italian party system. The institutional and moderate left prefer growth oriented and investment driven development projects, however the antagonist left prefer alternative models of development. Della Porta and Piazza (2008: 45) paper explains a case in Italy where the radical left were active and successful in mobilising people against a capital intensive displacing development projects than moderate environmentalist and centre left parties. It is quite evident that the parliamentary system never disowns the development that enables the state to exist. Thus, any such movement has to find the political space outside the parliamentary system. This also empowers the movement to articulate the idea of development and resistance in a more comprehensive way and explain its ideology as an opposition to the dominance.

Method of the study

This paper is meant to discuss the political and ideological position of the anti-displacement movement. It is based on case study from Kerala, where the local community has come together and formed a local resistance movement against a bypass

project as part of highway development. It is based on secondary data and interviews with the members of the movement.

THE ORIGIN OF PROTEST AND FORMATION OF “VAYALKILIKAL”

This particular highway project was proposed to construct a bypass road in Thaliparambu as part of widening the national highway passing through Kasargod to Kozhikode, Kerala, India. The highway authority had the option of constructing the road through Kuttikal-Kuvod-Plathottam via Kuppam or through Kuttikal-Kuvod-Keezhattur-Kuppam. The first option would need to pass through a densely-populated area and displace a huge number of people. The second option was a paddy field and was chosen since the number of displaced people would be comparatively less.

Keezhattur is a typical Communist Party of India (Marxist) village in which a majority follows CPI(M). A local party leader initiated the campaign against land survey a year ago, primarily out of the apprehension that it would impact the water resources. The CPI(M) withdrew the protest and endorsed the project, resulting in a division among the local porters. One group decided to continue the protest. The State PWD minister held a meeting and assured the protesters that the government was planning to change the alignment of the road to avoid acquisition of the paddy field. However, the survey process was initiated to acquire the land. It was a violation of the promise. Hence, a section of the local community decided to continue the protest. CPI(M) activists referred to them as a group having no permanent stay in the paddy field and called them “Vayalkilikal” (birds visiting during harvesting season for food and vanishing thereafter). Of late, it has become an identity and the protestors take it as the name of the movement. Suresh Keezhattoor, the leader of the movement communicated to the author that this is not a registered organisation or movement. It is a movement against corporate capitalism by people who are ideologically close to left politics. For him, it is a movement to protect the remaining paddy fields for water resource and ecology.



The strength of the movement is the support of the local and other people who support environmental movements. The local people include those who are going to lose the paddy field, but their number is limited i.e around 50 active protestors who were on protest cite. This number is less compared to other major anti-displacement movement in Kerala. It is organisational strategy and articulation what makes the movement active rather than number of supporters.

The supporters of the project eventually became critical of the Vayalkilikal rather than putting up the future prospects of the project for any public discussion. Deshabhimani daily sponsored by the CPI(M) carried a series of stories against the Vayalkilikal and in favour of the project. The content of the reports focused on *a*) the 56 land owners who gave consensus, and *b*) the demand for “development”. However, no such news stories were able to answer the question of ecological security and rice production raised by the Vayalkilikal. All pro-project arguments specifically emphasize that no farmer is active in the protests and that the movement is of a few individuals. Furthermore, CPI(M) media sources claim that all the protesters are naxalites. The visits of BJP leaders added to the allegations of it being an externally fabricated movement aimed at defaming the left government. Later, the local CPI(M) set up a new movement in favour of the project with the support of the State committee and followed the same modus operandi as the Vayalkilikal. CPI (M) activists in the areas keep project that Vayalkilikal is fighting for just ten acres of land only and not for the development. Every anti-Vayalkilikal argument attempts to keep “society and development” on its side. It is also important to acknowledge that demands for development which the government stands for exactly undermine the critical perspectives of the society. Development can be articulated in many ways that also get social acceptance.

ANTI-DEVELOPMENT/DISPLACEMENT AND POLITICAL EXCLUSION

Keezhattur movement is a classic example of how the public is informed about a movement. It was projected as a simple anti-displacement movement in the State and interestingly, the history of similar movements never came up in the discourse. It is movement led by working class men and women, for instance the leader of the protest movement Mr Suresh himself is small tea shop vendor. The protest is part of their everyday existence and also their political affiliation towards left ideology and experience with party helped them in shaping the nature of protests. Keezhattur protest demands to have a context-specific definition of displacement. It is not simply about displacement from “capital or resource”; it is against the idea of development promoted by the State. Suresh Keezhatoor, the leader of the movement categorically said, “this is the movement is for the protection of paddy field and oppose the corporate led development in the country. It is not simply a movement of affected people against displacement and ended up with compensation”. Thus, it demands a different perspective. However, the State only focuses on the number of land owners who gave their consent to take-over of the land, and ignores the ecology and labour dependency on the land. The local articulation of the movement deserves a more comprehensive assessment. Mrs. Janaki, a 75-year-old landless agricultural worker in the forefront of the movement has a strong reason to protest which is not simply opposing the displacement or the project, but the striving to secure water and ecology. She is a CPI(M) sympathizer but the local CPI(M) activists treated her as a BJP supporter and later, a Maoist.

Government and local CPI(M) leadership became extra sensitive with the issue and resorted to all possible options to defend the project. Interestingly, the counter arguments largely ignore the ecological dimension of the protest and focus fully on the displacement and compensation. The ecology of the area is largely confined within the land value of paddy field and set aside the movement’s right to articulate the implication of displacement on ecology i.e. water security. An online magazine



published an interview of one of the activists of Vayalkilikal who explained that the entire paddy field is surrounded by hills and is converted into a lake during monsoon that serves as a water recharge. This is true for every paddy field in Kerala. Converting them into normal land affects the wetlands and water resources of the State to a large extent. It is also important to consider the fact that Kerala is now declared as a drought-prone State, and hence, a basic and significant change in the government's approach to the environment is required.

Kerala Shasthra Sahithya Parishad (KSSP) a CPI (M) affiliated environmental NGO has conducted a detailed study on the land acquisition and displacement for the proposed highway development project in Keezhattur. The study began with an assessment of the importance of road development in Kerala. The six-line national highway project is an ongoing project in Kerala, requiring land acquisition under the instructions of the central government and the National Highway Development Authority. The KSSP report also mentions the importance of constructing bypass roads to connect villages to the national highway.

The KSSP report cited the 2008 Paddy Field Protection Act to justify any protest movement for conserving paddy fields. The study report also explained the ecological importance of the paddy field, its origin, its contribution to food security and ability to preserve ground water. The increasing number of vehicles in Kannure city has led to extensive demand for more roads, which justifies the reclaiming of paddy land for highways. Hence, the KSSP survey proposed an alternative plan rather than acquiring lands for roads and highways. The report listed alternatives such as: a) strengthen the public transport system and regulate the number of private vehicles, b) acquire paddy field only if there are no other options available, and c) construct flyovers. The total paddy field in Keezhattur is of 48.9 acres and inhabits 171 farmers. The numbers look very small in the context of Kerala. However, the field is extremely important in the ecological sense. It is referred in the report that the field contains 16 big pools and a number of small pools for irrigating paddy cultivation. During summer, tanker Lorries collect water from these pools to supply in the urban areas.

Tab. 1. *Alternative plan to save the paddy land*

<i>Suggestion</i>	<i>Total kilometres</i>	<i>Land to be acquired in hectares</i>	<i>Wet lands</i>	<i>Land in hectares</i>	<i>Public/revenue land</i>
First option	5.47	26.17	8.19	17.48	0.51
Second option	6.00	29.11	21.09	7.22	0.80
Third option (elevated highway)	5.50	10.33	2.23	8.10	0

Source: *KSSP study*

Two-time farming is practised in the area, meaning that the land is prepared to yield two-time crops. There are some land-owners who keep their land fallow, but there is a considerable increase in the area of production these days.

KSSP proposes an elevated highway and expansion of the existing highway as alternatives. They have presented an alternative plan as follows (see tab. 1).

KSSP emphasized the elevated highway in their alternative plan since it is less harmful to the local ecology. KSSP report is the only document that enlists all other options. Hence, the protest movement also endorses the study report. The letter written by Mr. Suresh Keezhattur, Convener, Vayalkilikal to the Union Transport Minister Mr. Nitin Gadkari on 28th Oct, 2017 referred the KSSP study and requested the minister to consider widening the existing national highway as an alternative. Apart from mentioning options, the letter demanded an independent environmental impact assessment of the proposed project. Mr. Suresh in his letter demands the intervention of the ministry of transport to abide by the Environmental Protection Act of

1986, which was subjected to multiple amendments, in 1994, 1997 and 2000. The Act makes an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) mandatory for an infrastructure project² and The Acts seeks active intervention of the government. No EIA has been conducted on this project, nor was there any pressure from the State government to conduct EIA. The short distance of the highway urges the government to ignore the rules and regulations. Furthermore, the protesters have submitted a memorandum to Mr. G. Sudhakaran, Minister of Public Work Kerala, requesting him to look for an alternative plan to save the local paddy field. These two letters show how the Vayalkilikal approach the project and articulate their reasons. Mr. Suresh Kizhaatoor, convener of the movement, stated very clearly while speaking to the author, “we are against corporate-led capitalism and we want to preserve our ecology”.

CPI(M) and the government do not endorse the KSSP report, although it is a left-leaning activist group. KSSP did a fair job of suggesting alternative ways rather than opposing the project. Out of the series of stories published by *Deshabhimani* daily in favour of the project, the article published on 26th March, 2018 deserves special attention. It gives a list of existing infrastructure projects built on paddy fields and wetlands. The write-up talks about the need for development rather than ecology. It calls the protesters opportunists who do not understand the left party’s idea of development. It compares Vayalkilikal to weeds, calling them unwanted. Meanwhile, the CPI(M) launched another parallel movement for national highway, but it could not articulate the importance of ecology and environment. Though it was promoted as a counter movement, it remained within the party circle and could not pose any ideological opposition to Vayalkilikal. The CPI(M) movement is confined to the idea of ‘development’ and its significance, which is an ongoing practice of the State and the private capitalist sector. Thus, it is limited to public imagination of development and the party has failed to go beyond the boundaries of a ruling party. Keezhattur movement aims to ensure local access to natural resources and takes into account the future dependency on local commons. Interestingly, the Vayalkilikal has articulated that the movement is primarily meant for restoring commons. However,



it is increasingly difficult in Kerala to get recognized by this objective. The ecological trade-offs between protecting commons and maintaining ecological security have not yet been demonstrated in Kerala as a necessity. CPI(M) never refer to the ecological concerns while defending the projects. Every pamphlet of CPI(M), office bearers and the ministers of left government have focused their criticism against Vayalkilikal and kept a strategic mum on the issues that they raised.

LONG STANDING PROTEST AND IDENTITY OF SUSTAINABILITY

Mr. Suresh Keezhatoor made it very clear that the Vayalkilikal endorse the left ideology; however, it does not mean that they accept all the policies of the left government. The movement is for ecology and aims to correct the government policies on paddy field diversion policy. Mr. Suresh cited the The Kerala Conservation of Paddy Land and Wetland Act, 2008 and put forward an argument that recognizes the paddy field protection in Kerala. Thus, it is important to study the history behind this Act and the implications of its latest amendments in the context of the Keezhattur protest.

The Kerala Conservation of Paddy Land and Wetland Act, 2008 was considered a landmark act in relation to the paddy field and environmental protection in Kerala. The Act was the result of a massive movement in Muriyad village in Thrissure district of Kerala. The Muriyad Movement in 2008 was a massive protest to conserve the paddy field which was kept in fallow for years and led to a complete stoppage of farming in the areas. The movement was led by small and marginal farmers along with the landless member of the local community and some sensitive environmental activists. They took a stand for protecting the local ecology of 7800 acres of paddy field. The movement received wide public attention and the government was forced to draft this Act. The Act proposed a monitoring committee consisting of president/chairperson/mayor of the local self-government along with an agriculture officer of the government and a representative of local self-government. The



committee was allowed to filling less than ten cents of paddy field in in Panchayat area and less than five cents in Municipal area. It also recommended preparation of a data bank of paddy field in the State. The data bank has not yet been prepared, and acres of paddy fields have been reclaimed for commercial and residential construction. Though the act was passed with a majority in the assembly, every political party in the State attempted to amend the act to facilitate encroachment and reclaiming of the fields for commercial use. The paper by Chitra (2016) observed that “The Kerala Conservation of Paddy Land and Wetland (Regularisation of Unauthorised Reclamation) Rules, 2015” was an attempt to make paddy fields available for commercial purposes. The amendment rule offers an option to those who reclaimed the paddy prior to 12th August 2008 to submit an application for normalisation by paying fees of Rs. 500 and submitting a proof document for the date of the reclamation. Considering the absence of a data bank on paddy field and reclamation, this is an opportunity for those who reclaimed the land and covert paddy filed into non-agricultural practices. This amendment completely undermined the ecological significance of the 2008 Act. In addition, on February 12, 2018, the Government of Kerala introduced another amendment to it with a clear aim and objective. The amendment was presented in the assembly as an ordinance and was passed. It eliminated the monitoring committee to conserve the paddy land. The provisions made the Act inapplicable to projects proposed by the government under the ‘public purpose’ category. This covers any project approved by the government, meaning that any private project with a government approval is now eligible to reclaim paddy lands. The purpose of this amendment was to ensure land reclamation for commercial projects. The Economic Survey of 2017 by Kerala State Panning Board carried the information that the land for paddy field was 8 Lakh hectares in 1980, which came down to 1.96 Lakh hectares in 2015-16 and again reduced to 1.71 Lakh hectares in 2016-17. While interacting with the author, Mr. Suresh was referring to this as the fundamental issue driving this movement.

Conceptually, the protest has to continue till the government changes its position on Keezhattur. Thus, the idea of protest would sustain while the forms and participation may change. It is quite unwise to apply the conventional method to assess the sustainability of the movement since it is formed out of an immediate concern of the local community. Since the government considers this an anti-State movement, the activists of the movement have to continue identifying themselves as opposing the government. For them, it is a movement to correct the policies of the government, and its sustainability depends on whether the State endorses their demands. The government is not under any critical pressure to engage with a local movement. State would listen to them only when it accepts the local right to define development i.e. “development democracy”. Interestingly the institutional left parties in Kerala had initiated a successive decentralized and peoples planning project in 1996 with the support of local civil society organizations. As Heller (2001) paper disuses, the success of decentralization in Kerala (India), Porto Alegre (Brazil) and South Africa. It is a comparative assessment of the success of decentralization in these three regions. He analyses that in Kerala the idea of democratic decentralization was implemented by the Community Party of India (Marxist) and CPI with the support of civil society and Kerala State Planning Board. The critical argument of the paper is how a Leninist Party agreed to accept the decision from below. According to him to question a state-led development one needs the active local initiatives and local movement rather than technocratic or Leninist. Decentralization empowers the local articulation of development and rights. So, the position of CPI (M) towards Vayalkilikal is indeed a rejection of their own initiatives in 1996. One of the factors that the anti-displacement movements are yet to reckon with is their potential to prevent rehabilitation from becomes a permanent vulnerability. The life and livelihood of the displaced community are largely regulated and influenced by the displacement project. Most of the rehabilitation projects have eventually ended up providing basic minimum facilities as right. Once the communities accept displacement, they also accept the project of rehabilitation and resettlement. According to him, “we need alternatives rather than



alternative to development”. This is the slogan which Vayalkilikal wanted to identify itself with. Government and CPI(M) never want to endorse this identity of Vayalkilikal, with the larger agenda of limiting them to a protest against displacement. It is a technical process too, since government and CPI(M) claim that 56 out of 60 landowners³ have given consensus and hence, the project can start without any fail. The primary challenge ahead of Vayalkilikal is to counter the government and CPI(M) argument. For Mr. Suresh Keezhatoor, such claims are meant to pull down the spirit of the movement. For them, it is not a movement for compensation and resettlement based on consent letters. The paddy fields which they wanted to protect are not ensuring any individual benefit to the protestors instead it ensure ecological security in terms of ground water etc. It is a protest against the capitalist developmental approach of parliamentary left, and hence they do not want to have any negotiation with government for compensation and resettlement. The owners of the land are getting compensation and they are not supporting the movement as well. Here it is important to understand that this movement is located within the non-parliamentary articulation of right against the growth-oriented development concept of institutional left. The movement is against those land owners who gave consent and government which wanted to promote growth-oriented development approaches. CPI(M) considers this movement a threat to the development that the party stands for. This needs special attention in the larger context of State withdrawal from development and the established position of the left parties on State-led development. Unlike other political parties, left parties stand for public investment and State-led infrastructure development. Hence, a bypass in Keezhattur is a government-funded project when they are in power. It is policy of government and ruling parties to take ownership on development project and demonstrates it as the need of the society to grow.

The CPI(M) and government see the political importance of the project in Kerala and not only in Keezhattur. It is evident from their argument that the project is presented as benefitting the entire State of Kerala. This view is also shared by the com-

mittee appointed by the Government of India's highway development authority. It is evident in the report prepared in June, 2018 by Mr. Johan Thomas⁴, Research Officer of Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change. This report was made on the request of Mr. Suresh Keezhatoor, leader of the *Vayalkilikal* and submitted through the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which rules the country at the centre. He wanted a proper assessment of the impact of the project on local ecology and expected official support from central government. BJP wanted to take political gain by being alien with the *Vayalkilikal* since they do not have a strong parliamentary presence in Kerala. BJP wanted to support this particular movement since Kerala is ruled by Left front parties, which ideologically oppose them. Interestingly, taking a stand for land acquisition and environmental conservation is not on their agenda. However, they support the movement in Kerala as a local political strategy. Nevertheless, the MOEF and CC committee did not pay heed to the local political strategy of BJP and made the following observations. It is mentioned in the report that a total of 12.2246 hectares of land in Keezhattur is identified for acquisition, of which 3.3032 hectares are gardens and 8.9214 hectares are wetlands. In the report, MOEF & CC made an interesting observation that "any developmental activity is likely to marginally affect populations and labour force. These are likely to stabilize with new renewed occupations springing up and can absorb the changes in the social framework. Road and the associated development would bring in more avenues for employment". It is quite evident that MOEF & CC agree with the stand taken by both CPI(M) and Government of Kerala on the project. Furthermore, the committee made a statement on ecological destruction that "the topography of the State of Kerala is bestowed with a rich biodiversity that is prevalent in most parts of the state. The richness is enriched by the abundance of rivers, waterways and the Western Ghat that line the length of the locations in the vicinity. The developmental activity undertaken in any part of the state will inflict marginal destruction of the ecosystems and it forms inevitable phase of the huge demand for development". These two statements in the report put BJP in trouble and they had to overcome the damage caused by it.



The Minister of Road Transport invited the leaders of Vayalkilikal through local BJP leaders to the capital city and assured them of looking at alternatives; however, no concrete idea came up. The conflict between Vayalkilikal and Government/CPI(M) extended to the central government as well. The centre government did not revoke the report. They merely stopped the land acquisition for the time being. Vayalkilikal has the right over the environment of their locality, which could be considered a democratic right. It has been accepted in the parliamentary system. For instance, the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments legitimize the grass-root level democracy. It also gives power to local community initiatives to determine the nature of development projects in their area⁵. Therefore, the Vayalkilikal argument is legitimate in the specific context of democratic movements. However, the government found it a violation of the development rights of the people of the State. The primary conflict lies in the articulation of rights and ownership of development. Again, Ministry of Road Transport, Government of India rejected the request of Vayalkilikal and approved the Government of Kerala's plan and position on the project. This forced the Vayalkilikal to gear up their protests.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATION

Displacing people for development is a continuous project in India and has been an old practice in the State of Kerala. Every displacement leads to protests that eventually succumb to the power of the government. It does not mean that those movements are insignificant or irrelevant. All of such movements raise fundamental questions on the right to live and the liberty to claim democratic rights. As Le Galès and Vitale (2013) paper argues that the right of the citizen is a project of governance. Ensure public good does mean state recognise the social and ethnic diversity of the governed rather than listening to the elite class in governance. Here Vayalkilikal also raises questions on the right to define the character of development and to question the ownership of development. These two rights are located within the particular local specificity and this

implies that the rights are located within collective demands for changes. Although Vayalkilikal have not acquired the stature of a State-wide ecological protection movement, their demands inspire similar movements in Kerala. The activists of the movement demanded implementation of the Paddy Field Protection Act and raised objections on the latest amendments on the act. They restricted their demands to the locality, which is the strength of such movements. Left parties often criticize such movements as local and unable to change the policy or influence the State. However, the movements question the ideological standpoint of left parties on environment and development. The inability of the left parties to practise their ideology in the context of the changing political system limits them to being an agent of State and obstructs all alternative articulations on development. The counter movement which CPI(M) built in Keezhattur never speaks about environment nor puts forward any effective counter narrative on what the Vayalkilikal consider as ecology. The language adopted by the CPI(M) and the government is acceptable to all parliamentary political parties. The movement acquired the character of a movement to protect the democratic right to defend the idea of development. The importance of such movements in India is that every state is now experiencing such massive public protest against land acquisition for development projects. And all these states the fight is between the people and political parties, no political party is able to listen to them. This has changed the discourse of parliamentary politics and democratic right to protest in the public discourse.

NOTES

¹ https://au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/7796-treaty-0039_-_kampala_convention_african_union_convention_for_the_protection_and_assistance_of_internally_displaced_persons_in_africa_e.pdf.

² <http://www.moef.nic.in/division/introduction-8>.

³ <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/on-kerala-red-turf-green-twist-to-agitation-over-a-small-paddy-field-5113772/>.

⁴ Report on the site visit and submission of factual report-complaint by Suresh Keezhathoor through Kummnam Rajashekarana, Kerala. Report submitted by John Thomas, Research Officer, MOEF&CC, Bengaluru June 2018.

⁵ In case of the mining in Niyamgiri hills in Odisha, the Supreme Court asked the State government to conduct a tribal gramasabha under the 73rd amendment of the constitution. 12 Gramapanchyats out of 15 had decided to say no to the mining project by Vedanta Aluminium Limited.

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