



Dalit Movements and the Political Economy of Biodiversity Conservation

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Introduction

Biodiversity conservation is an evolutionary phenomenon. Regional, local and cultural specificities are integral part of the evolution of biodiversity conservations. The institutional understanding of biodiversity conservation evolved through the principles of livelihood dependency, common property right and environmental support. Development backwardness and poverty advocate an anthropocentric approach to biodiversity. Anthropocentric approach to biodiversity is also attached with economic value of natural resources. Managing such an anthropocentric resource utilisation model generally requires centralised ownership and controlled access. Human needs have got the 'centre of existence'; however, it does not ensure an inclusive access to all. The process which defines the centre and periphery is subjected to the existing social and economic structure.

This paper attempts to put caste as a deciding factor in defining centre and periphery in anthropocentric development models. The paper further explores the question of the Dalit position towards biodiversity conservation in India. Generally the tribal community and livelihoods are discussed under the biodiversity conservation programmes, Dalits are largely being excluded from this debate. Exclusion of tribes from forest area is indeed manifested. The Forest Right Act (FRA) is an example of this manifestation. The right of traditional forest dwellers are legally protected under the FRA, however, it does not mean that tribal communities are enjoying the fruits of law. Displacement of tribal and forceful acquisition of forest land across the country reflects the government's approach towards FRA. The problems of Dalits with regard to natural resource remain outside the purview of general theoretical perspective of the environment and justice. The larger concern is the 'ownership of environment'. Dalit institutionally remain outside the purview of natural resource ownership, hence, their access to resource is driven by livelihood dependence and common accessibility.

Livelihood dependence of Dalit has never been a political issue, either for the government or for the private sector. Therefore, it remains an issue of Dalit only! As Marx's defined, 'the relations of man to nature "were" practically from the outset, that is, relations established by action'. Marx's notion of the alienation of human labour was connected to an understanding of the alienation of human beings from nature (Foster2000:9). The alienation led the emergence of an economic value building that has completely redefined the biodiversity conservation. The resources which were excluded from the previous market values are increasingly getting into the market value system. Appropriations of natural resources under individual economic value have generated a number of owners than ever before.

Dalit and Resource ownership in India

Dalits are not enjoying much ownership and position in either anthropocentric or anthropogenic natural resource governance. Land and natural resource ownership is the constraint. The table 1 explains the nature of Dalit land ownerships in India.

Table 1

Main Land Use	Area Under Main Land Use for Scheduled Castes in India		
	(Agricultural Census years 1985-1986 and 1990-1991)		Percentage Change During 1990-91 Over 1985-86
	1985-86	1990-91	
Total Operated Area	12632	13173	4.3
	-100	-100	-
Net Cultivated Area*	11637	12284	5.6
	-92.1	-93.3	-
Land Available for Cultivation**	12399	12963	4.5
	-98.2	-98.4	-
Land not Available for Cultivation	233	210	-9.8
	-1.8	-1.6	-
Land Unutilised@	762	680	-10.8
	-6	-5.2	-

Source:www.indiastat.com

Table 1 is an illustration of land ownership pattern among Dalits in India. The land available for cultivation, in fact tells the story of caste in agricultural land holdings. The majority holds marginal cultivable land, which has less access to water, including irrigation facilities. Table 2 explains the categories of land holding among Dalits in India.

Table 2

Size Group-wise Number of Holdings/Operated Area and Average Size of Holdings of Scheduled Castes in India (1980-1981, 1985-1986, 1990-1991, 2000-2001 and 2005-2006)						
Size Groups	1980-1981	1985-1986	1990-1991	1995-1996	2000-2001*	2005-2006*
Number of Holdings (In '000)						
Marginal	6923	8508	9689	10844	11385	12233
Small	1644	1923	2130	2275	2318	2445
Semi-Medium	952	1067	1092	1099	1019	1014
Medium	438	456	432	400	357	326
Large	95	87	79	71	62	56
All Size	10052	12041	13422	14688	15140	16073
Operated Area (In '000 ha)						
Marginal	2510	3000	3409	3835	4074	4494
Small	2324	2713	3010	3176	3237	3364
Semi-Medium	2576	2878	2944	2939	2716	2693
Medium	2554	2636	2492	2291	2040	1865
Large	1557	1413	1319	1164	1009	883
All Size	11521	12639	13173	13406	13077	13300
Average (In ha.)						
Marginal	0.36	0.37	0.35	0.35	0.36	0.37
Small	1.41	1.41	1.41	1.4	1.4	1.38
Semi-Medium	2.71	2.7	2.7	2.67	2.67	2.66
Medium	5.84	5.78	5.77	5.73	5.72	5.72
Large	16.44	16.24	16.7	16.48	16.27	15.91
All Size	1.15	1.05	0.98	0.91	0.86	0.83

Source:www.indiastat.com

Table 2 is, in fact, a continuation of the previous table. It also shows the declining trend of large land holdings among Dalits. Where does this land go? Land is not disappearing; instead it has been taken over or handed over to others. Lack of access to land is equally applicable to all other natural resources. The ‘divine ownership’ of land is still practiced in India. This statement seems a bit odd in nature; yet, the Brahmanical base of land ownership still determines Indian resource politics. The structural inequality has already excluded Dalit community from the mainstream resource ownership, hence, justice and equality within an anthropocentric model does not make any sense to Dalit. This is, in fact, a governance crisis too. Dalit’s access to biodiversity needs to be discussed in this perspective.

Economic importance of biodiversity

The Biological Diversity Act, 2002, explained the importance of biodiversity conservation, according to which “*an Act to provide for conservation of biological diversity, sustainable use of its components and fair and equitable sharing of the benefits arising out of the use of biological resources, knowledge and for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto*”. The act defines the importance of commercial use of biodiversity as, “*commercial utilization*” means end uses of biological resources for commercial utilization such as drugs, industrial enzymes, food flavours, fragrance, cosmetics, emulsifiers, oleoresins, colours, extracts and genes used for improving crops and livestock through genetic intervention, but does not include conventional breeding or traditional practices in use in any agriculture, horticulture, poultry, dairy farming, animal husbandry or bee keeping”. Commercial utilisation defines the value of biodiversity. Willingness to pay for biodiversity conservation is getting unprecedented importance. The market also favours the willingness to pay approach. The resources which were excluded from the previous market values are increasingly getting into the market value system. The collective ownership set aside for larger economic gain. The applications of common-pool resource are considered to be effective mechanisms to check large-scale resource appropriation. However, it is not free from its limitation. The capability of Common-pool resources (CPR) model to take into consideration the Dalit’s access to natural resources is yet to be proved.

Common-pool resources and Dalit

The meaning of the concept ‘common property’ is well established in formal institution, such as the Anglo-Saxon common law, the German land law, the Roman law, and their successors. It is also well-established in informal institutional arrangements based on custom, tradition, kinship and more. Economists are not free to use the concept common property resources or ‘commons’ under conditions where no institutional arrangements exist. Common pool

resources are resources for which exclusion of others is difficult to achieve and for which, joint use reduces the availability of benefits derived from the resource for others. The debate on their sustainable management has been driven by the “tragedy of the commons” thesis, which predicts the over exploitation and eventual ruin of all common resources due to individual users’ rational incentive to maximize utility (Hardin 1968). Another explanation of common property resources management is defined as ; (a) ‘open access,’ which refers to a ‘free for all’ situation, where rules regulating access to and allocation of benefits from the resource are absent ; (b) ‘public property,’ where access rights for the public are held in trust by the Crown or state; (c) ‘private property,’ where tradable rights are owned by an individual, household, or company ; and (d) ‘common property,’ where a set of rules is present to govern access to, allocation of, and control over the CPR (Steins and Edwards, 1998).

Common property is not ‘everybody’s property’. . . to describe un owned resources (re nullius) as common property (res communes), as many economists have done for years in the case of high seas fisheries, is a self-contradiction (Ciriacy-Wantrapand Bishop 1975). Common-pool resources have two characteristic. First, the resource is so large that it is costly (but not impossible) to exclude potential beneficiaries from obtaining its use. Second, the supply is limited; consumption by one user reduces its availability to others (Ostrom, et al 1994). As has already been noted, neoclassical economists have typically used the term ‘common property’ to denote a situation of open access. The natural outcome of such a term is that the conversion or regulation of such resources become a necessary condition for conflict resolution arise out of economic use of ‘common property’ resources (Quiggin, 1988).

In terms of rights, there exists a difference between types of property rights and the types of resources. In certain context, same category of resources may be exploited under a range of property rights. In principle, common pool resources are often considered as a subset of public goods. Accessibility to such resources are often either with finite or subtractive benefits, i.e. if A uses more, the less remains for others, hence common pool resources are subjected to congestion, depletion or degradation (Wade, 1987).

Challenges on Common Pool resources

Neo-liberal development policy has critically impinged upon the right of people over the resources. The traditional right of the community has been often unfit to the modern value system. The resources and its externalities in terms of ‘new market price’ often put pressure on the traditional value system and rights as well. Since the market based policy is becoming a governance principle, a likely failure of market oriented policies to manage commons have initiated the enquiry of alternative governing mechanisms for forests, pastures, water and fisheries. The new approaches of governance help market based value system to establish resource sharing alliances with state actors to defend the primacy of their claims (Azhar 1993). Often government institutions are involved in the privatisation of commons.

Application of common-pool resource and its critique are significant to environmental governance. However, when the Dalits are concerned, common-pool resources are the next alternative to ensure access to biodiversity. It is too problematic to put the tragedy of commons on Dalit's access to resources. Over exploitations of resources are not due to the dependence of Dalit and other marginal sections over natural resources. Converting common-pool resources to private good or raw material indeed put pressure on resources. The land acquisitions for developmental projects are proving this process. The violation of wetland conservation act in Kerala, Mangrove destruction in Mumbai and Orissa state, and sand mining from coastal Kerala etc. are proving how natural resources have been exploited and its consequences on marginal communities. Hence, how Dalits, especially those who are excluded from the development process, look at the CPR debate and conservation of biodiversity is important.

The life of Kadal Pokkudan, a Dalit environmental activist from Kerala explains the anthropogenic relation of Dalits and Mangroves in Kerala. The public has some sort of understanding of Mangroves, especially people who live in the embankment of rivers and coastal areas. He narrates another method of understanding the importance of Mangroves. The manner in which he defines the ecological importance of Mangroves is unparalleled in Kerala. According to him, 'I planted mangroves to stop water entering into the muddy road and keep the school children'. He has planted about 6000 Mangroves plants across the river basins of Kerala.

Pokkudan's life and his services to ecology may not be fit into the neo-liberal development approach. He himself defines the ecological value of Mangroves. The conflicts over commons also have to be looked at this perspective. Biodiversity is not an exception in this regard. The collective needs of Dalits are also limited to the available ecological services. This not an over exaggerated argument. This is quite evident from the social and economic profile of Dalit community and the exclusion from the mainstream development process.

The current debates on biodiversity conservation could be considered as market debate within the ‘un-equal development’ project. Hence, the Dalit position on biodiversity conservation has to challenge both the biodiversity conservation project and development project as well. The Biological Conservation Act 2002 has already permitted the destruction of biodiversity for economic purpose. Resultantly, , Dalits’ position on biodiversity is legally questionable. Legal, economic and environmental considerations have to be incorporated in such struggle.

Concluding observations

This paper intended to analyse the critical relationship of Dalit community with biodiversity. The existing legal and economic implication of biodiversity conservation models is activated within the economic value of natural resource conservation. However, the impact of the destruction of biodiversity is not equally applicable to all. The poor are more vulnerable to environmental destruction and of them, Dalit suffers a lot due to general social and economic exclusion. Pressure on conserving biodiversity on Dalit has to be considered as a struggle against exclusion. Such struggles are

indeed able to regulate common-pool resource and preserve the biodiversity. However, these efforts also remain outside the domain of current biodiversity conservation. Mere restoration of livelihood would not be the only option, another option such as land redistribution and collective right over resource are important.

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