CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

This study tries to explore the interface between environmental and trade union movements in Kerala with a special focus on Chaliyar and Plachimada movements, two well-known environmental agitations in the state of Kerala. The working class in Kerala has a reputation for winning most of its agitations on the strength of collective bargaining power. At the same, it is alleged that the labour militancy pushes up wages disturbing industrial production with the result that the comparative cost remains unattractive for industrial investment unlike other regions. Contrary to this argument, a new trade union culture, with the basic character of class co-operation, has been evolving in the state during the last few decades. Among the large number of reasons behind this kind of a basic change in the working class behavior, the high level of environmental awareness of the people and consequent agitations draw special attention. The main reason for the closure of Grasim Industries Mavoor, an industrial unit owned by the Birla management was the protest raised by the victims of multi-faceted industrial pollution. The protesters wanted to save river Chaliyar from a premature death due to the irrational discharge of untreated effluents into the river water.

The situation in Plachimada in Palakkad district where the Hindustan Coca Cola Beverages Private Limited was located seems to be more or less same. The irrational exploitation of ground water dropped the ground water level several hundred feet down creating severe drought in the region. People living in the neighboring villages, mainly tribes, started agitations against the
Cola Company, which gradually turned into an international movement against the multinational corporations.

It is a fact that environmental movements have become a common phenomenon in industrial areas across the state, which leads to closure of factories and retrenchment of workers. The fear of retrenchment tends to compel the working class and their organizations to give up their traditional enmity with the capitalist and to join with the latter to fight what is called eco-fundamentalism. This study is an attempt to analyze the impact of environmental activism on the trade union movement of Kerala with the help of an analysis of movements in Mavoor and Plachimada.

1.1 Major Questions involved in the study

This study mainly addresses the following questions

- How do the workers and the left in Kerala respond to environmental movements, when they hit industry?
- Does it cause a shift in the traditional enmity between the working class and the capitalist?
- Does it require a re-thinking over the Marxian concept of class war?
- What would be the result of this new trade union culture on working class politics in Kerala?

1.2 Theoretical framework

Among the various theories applied in this study, the Marxist theory on class war deserves special reference. The working class politics and the trade unionism in the state of Kerala are mainly attempted from a Marxist
theoretical perspective. The concept of ‘Farewell to working classes’ appears in the study as a theoretical tool to discuss the decline of class-consciousness and class-based politics in Kerala (Gorze, 1982). This study also depends on the ideas like labor militancy, class co-operation, social movement unionism, political party-trade union nexus and informalization. The study has used the theoretical approach used by Ramachandra Guha and Juan Martinez Alier in their comparative study on global environmental activism from the North-South perspective.

The social movement theory, both in the traditional sense and in new social movement scholarship (NSM) appears in the study. It looks at the trade union movement in the state of Kerala as a traditional social movement, whereas the environmental movements in Mavoor and Plachimada stand as the examples of new social movements (Rose, 1997). The theory of cross-movement pollination is used to discuss the dynamics of inter movement relationship between the trade union and environmental movements in Kerala (Bratman, 2005). The theory of social movement unionism explains the solidarity work carried out by the informal trade union GROW (Carta, 2006). The active involvement of environmental activists in this social movement unionism is explained with the help of post-modern social theory on multiple identities.

The forces of Globalization have shifted the domain of opposition to MNC activities from host country to the local community. The analysis of Plachimada agitation is mainly carried out with the help of theory of globalization. The conflict between the MNC and local community is tried from the perspective of cultural gap theory. Moreover, the theory of
Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has a partial application in the analysis of reasons for corporate-community conflicts (Calvano, 2007). The Bio power theory that the lives of individuals are commodities that can be seized and controlled for the purpose of accumulating wealth within the capitalist system is used in the study of environmental hazards caused by the extraction industries at Mavoor and Plachimada (Foucault, 1978).

1.3 Hypothesis

There are three major hypotheses in this study. They are:

1.3.1 The environmental movements in Kerala hit industries and this forms one of the prime reasons for the closure of factories in Kerala leading to heavy retrenchment.

1.3.2. The fear of throwing out of employment instigates the working class to give up their traditional enmity with the capitalist and wage a joint struggle against what they call ‘environmental fundamentalism’.

1.3.3 The reluctance of working class in supporting environmental movements has given them the face of a reactionary force leading to serious erosion in the popular base of Kerala trade union movement.

1.4 Major concepts used in the Study

Concepts are operational tools in social science research. They help us in integrating the debate as well as in specifying the focus of discussions. Concepts like environmental activism, eco-fundamentalism, collective bargaining, industrial democracy, labour militancy, mass movement, class
war, class co-operation etc have been used. The conceptual interpretations are given below.

1.4.1 **Environmental Activism**: It is described as the advocacy of the preservation of the natural environment, especially the social and political movement to control environmental pollution. Other specific goals of environmental activism include conservation of natural resources, restriction of the negative effects of modern technology, and the adoption of environmentally benign forms of political and economic organization.

1.4.2 **Collective Bargaining**: This is a process of accommodation between the trade union's and management's conflicting interests. K N Subramanian in his book Labour Management Relations in India defines collective bargaining as “the term applied to the process by which trade unions and management voluntarily meet, discuss, argue, rebut, negotiate and finally settle some or all of the terms on which employees agree to work for an employer for the duration of the agreement.

1.4.3 **Industrial democracy**: It is a concept advanced by Sidney and Beatrice Webbs, which stands for a state of democracy in the realm of industry through the process collective bargaining.

1.4.4. **Labour Militancy**: A unique behavior of labour with regard to the objectives without considering the socio-political-economic implications in the society. Usually it refers to a negative attempt from the part of the labour force towards productivity and development.
1.4.5 **Class-War:** This concept is conceived by Karl Marx, which describes the hostility between the workers and the capitalist. This conflict continues so long as the capitalist system exists.

1.4.6 **Class Co-operation:** It is a concept, which stands for a condition where the capitalist and workers move together. Instead of class conflict, the two classes run the system of industrial democracy in a healthy way.

1.4.7 **Social movement Unionism:** Social movement unionism is a new type of trade unionism that provides a large role for students, youth and other activists to forge a multi-class and multi-identity coalition for the success of a strike.

1.4.8 **New Social Movements:** The new social movements are defined as mobilization of society that generally stem from people outside of the formal political arena. Through their activities, movements can influence the formation of political parties, set agendas, and shape society in terms of policy, norms and ideas.

1.5 **Chapter Scheme**

The report of this study (dissertation) contains eight chapters, which include introduction and conclusion. They are:

Chapter I: Introduction
Chapter II: Trade Union Movement in Kerala: Trends and Developments
Chapter III: Rise of Environmental Movement in Kerala
Chapter IV: Mavoor Movement: A Critical Approach
Chapter V: Plachimada Agitation: An overview
Chapter VI: Interface with Trade Union and Environmental Movement: A Critical Appraisal
Chapter VII: Emerging Trends in Kerala Trade Union Movement
Chapter VIII: Conclusion

1.5.1 The first chapter of this dissertation introduces the entire research work. This includes a statement of the research problem, major questions involved in the study, hypothesis, theoretical framework of the study, notes on major concepts, research methodology, a brief review of literature, the chapter scheme, and finally a brief reference on the findings of the study.

1.5.2 The Second chapter is an effort to trace the unique features of Kerala trade Union Movement. It begins with a brief narration of the evolution trade unionism with a special focus on the trade union movement in India. The focus of this chapter is on those special characteristic features of Kerala trade unionism, which are closely related to the subject matter of this research. Thus, the chapter contains a discussion about labor militancy, political party-trade union nexus, informalization and class co-operation.

1.5.3 The Third chapter is divided into three parts. The first part is a general introduction to environmental activism with a reference on ‘Silent Spring’ and the perceptual gap between the global North and South. The second part is an attempt to discuss a few environmental movements in India, which include a brief narration of Khejri movement, Appikko movement, Chipko movement and Narmada Bachao Andolan movement. The final part of this chapter is an analytical survey of the environmental movements in Kerala. This part is prepared with a special focus on development/environment debate with an
intention to give a background to the so-called blue green conflicts in Kerala. Therefore, it contains a report on issues related to Silent Valley, Endosulfan, industrial pollution in Kathikudam and Eloor-Edayar industrial belt. Moreover, this chapter attempts to discuss the role of NGOs to analyze the Marxist reservations on environmental movements in Kerala.

1.5.4 The Fourth chapter has been divided into four parts. The first part presents an introduction to the Grasim industries, Mavoor with special emphasize on those development paradigms used by the mainstream left to justify the abnormal concessions given to this extraction industry. The second part is a detailed discussion over the environmental impacts caused by this industry. This includes issues like air and water pollution, the problems of deforestation and finally the cultural impact on tribes and traditional workers. Third part explores the rise of environmental awareness in and around Mavoor. It describes the important landmarks in the history of Chaliyar movement. The Final part of this chapter examines the role of mainstream left in Chaliyar movement. It also contains a brief review of the role played by the KSSP in making people aware of industrial pollution.

1.5.5 The fifth chapter is a discussion about the Plachimada Agitation. For the convenience of analysis, the chapter is divided into four main parts. The first part presents historical and analytical survey of the establishment of the Coca Cola factory at Plachimada. The second part describes the environmental hazards caused by the new factory. This includes the issues related to scarcity and contamination of water, the decline of agriculture, the changes in the work culture etc. The third part critically examines the rise of
environmentalism in Plachimada. Fourth part goes through the role of mainstream left in the Plachimada movement.

1.5.6 The Sixth Chapter is based on a discussion about the interface between the environmental and trade union movements. The chapter begins with an introductory remark on the evolution of blue-green conflicts in Kerala. This discussion brings a review of silent valley conflict from the perspective of blue-green coalition. Moreover, it presents similar issues in connection with Endosulfan and industrial pollution in Eloor Edayar area. The chapter explores the details of the conflicts between the working class and the environmental activists.

1.5.7 The seventh chapter discusses the emerging trends in Kerala trade union movement in the context of blue-green conflicts. This discussion is limited to four major trends, which have a direct reference to the interface between trade union and environmental movements in Kerala. Firstly, it considers the possibilities of a blue-green coalition, in the context of green Marxist thoughts. Secondly, it presents a discussion over the issue of non-class consolidation as a reaction against environmental activism. Fourthly, there is a reference on new trade union initiative as another typical response to environmentalism. The informal trade unions seem to be eco-friendly when compared to traditional organizations of workers.

1.5.8 The last chapter is divided into three parts. The first parts presents a concluding remarks on major areas like environmentalism, trade unionism, Chaliyar Movement, blue-green conflicts etc. The second part presents major
finding of the study and final parts brings the suggestions for future study and research.

1.6 A Brief Review of Literature

1.6.1 Trade Unionism:

Several studies on Indian trade union movement and environmental activism have taken place in the past. Ramachandran Nair (1973) has attempted to study the trade unionism in Kerala from the viewpoint of industrial relations. Arya P.P (1985) and Ramanujan G (1986) have made a serious attempt to present a historical overview of Indian trade union movement. These studies are significant in explaining the evolution of the movement from a historical perspective. Chathunny Master’s (1988) arguments in favor of factory management seem to be a call for class cooperation. Mohan and Ram (1988) presents the story of GROW-led social movement unionism in Mavoor. In another attempt, Mohan and Ram (1989) critically examine the manner in which the working class struggle in Mavoor was concluded. For the trade unions, it was a complete failure. Subramanian K.K (1990) is relevant for his dissenting note on the so-called labour militancy in Kerala. The report of the high-level committee on Industry, trade and Power (Planning Board Vol.1, 1990) brings an assessment of the negative impact of militant trade unionism on industrial development. Muhammad E.K (1996) is a critic of trade unionism in Mavoor. He strongly argues for a blue-green coalition. Das (1999) has gone through the phenomenon of ‘decline of trade union membership in India’. Anannya Bhattacharjee (2006) refers to the new trends in trade union movement, with a special focus on
informal trade union in India. It also presents a note on New Trade Union Initiative (NTUI), a trade union without a party affiliation. Nair (2006) has made another attempt to present a detailed story of trade union movement in Kerala, which presents a report of major struggle in sectors like toddy, KSEB, Keltron, plantations etc. This work is unique for presenting a narration on the contributions of important trade union leaders in Kerala. Datt’s (2008) analysis of trade union movement in India is relevant in the context of ongoing liberalization Programme. Mritunjoy Mohanthy (2009) deals with the trade unions of casual or contract workers. Cherian’s (2011) views on Endosulfan indicate the emerging trends in Kerala trade union Movement.

1.6.2 Environmental Activism:

George Perkins Marsh’s (1864) historical effort to discuss the relationship between man and nature deserves a special reference in the study of world environmental movement. Rachel Carson’s (1965) Silent Spring seems to be the most popular text on ecology ever published in human history. It presented the negative impact of pesticides and insecticides on natural environment. Calvert and Susan (1999) present another debate on environment from a North South perspective. Nesthrove (1980), Deleage (1989) and Schmidt (1971) attempt to explore Marxian views on ecology. The ecology of Saral (1999) is a critic of both capitalist and socialist systems. Gadgil and Guha (1993) look at history of India from an ecological perspective. Guha’s (2000) historical and analytical study of world environmental movements with a special emphasize on South and North dimension is noteworthy. John Bellamy Foster (2000) has attempted to explore Marxian views on ecology. Gorz, Andre (1980) presents the view that
ecology constitutes an integral part of politics. Shiva Vandana (1988) has tried to look at the issues related to development and ecology from a feminist perspective. Her work (1991) on conflicts over natural resources seems to be highly relevant in the context of extraction industries. Right to water seems to be a major concern in her work (2006). The Citizens’ Report (1988 onwards) by Anil Agarwal is an appreciable attempt to consolidate quantitative and descriptive data on India’s environment. Clark’s (2005) interpretations of bottle water industry present an analytical tool for the study of soft drinks industry in general.

1.6.3 Plachimada Agitation


1.6.4 Chaliyar Movement

Abdu Cheruvady (1979), Achuthan. A (1979) and Anandan Nellikkode(1996) have made serious efforts to explore the problems of industrial pollution caused by the Grasim Industries, Mavoor. Karunakaran (1999) and Muraleedharan (1980) reinforces this argument by a study of the impact of Grasim Industries on Kerala Forest, particularly on the bamboo

1.6.5 Social Movements


In his attempt to Study the inner party conflicts within the CPIM, Rammohan (1998) has made a reference to the prevalence of conflicting
views on development projects. Similarly, Parameswaran (1980) has mentioned about reactionary attitude of the trade unions in Kerala towards environmental activism. This review of literature indicates that there is a vacuum with regard to the interface between the trade union and environmental movements in Kerala, which necessitates a detailed analysis of the actions and interactions between these two social movements. The present study is an effort to fulfill this academic interest.

1.7 Methodology

Both historical and analytical methods have been used to collect information about the establishments of the industrial units at Mavoor and Plachimada, the environmental impact of these two factories, rise of environmental activism and the growth of trade unionism.

Nevertheless, the study is mainly based on empirical research. In this connection, a wide range of data including in-depth interviews, newsletters, internal documents, newspaper articles and information collected from other primary and secondary sources has been used. Interviews with leaders of trade union, political parties, environmental activists, academics and local people were the main source of information. Majority of these interviews were held in person, whereas a few were by phone. Most of them were informal interviews with a few standardized questions.

The data used in this study are mainly from primary and secondary sources. The Primary sources included interview with the respondents, various publications by trade unions, political parties and environmental activist and scientific reports submitted by various governmental and non-
governmental agencies. Articles by the activists connected with Mavoor and Plachimada movements are also treated as primary sources. The secondary source include reports in newspapers, magazines and similar other means of mass communication.

1.8 Major Findings of the Study

There exists a perceptual gap between the trade union and environmental movements in Kerala with regard to environment protection. This perceptual gap prevents the organized trade unions from sensitizing the dangers of industrial pollution, which leads to blue-green-conflicts in Industrial areas. The gravity of blue-green conflict is directly proportionate to the volume of workforce in the industry. The smaller the number of workers, the lesser shall be the chances of blue-green conflicts. The development paradigms conceived by the mainstream left in Kerala contrast with ecology. The dominant group within the mainstream left upholds modernist values. This inversely affects the traditional social base of the left movement in Kerala. The blue-green conflicts and consequent class-co-operation has resulted in the failure of working class to pursue class-based politics in Kerala (Rose, 1997). There are notable attempts for an amalgamation of the interests of the environmental and working class movements, particularly in the traditional sectors. The efforts for the revival of green Marxist tradition, which started during the period of Silent Valley movement found, aborted.

Among the various preconditions for the fruitful completion of this study, an analysis of the origin and development of trade union movement in
Kerala with a special emphasize on trends related to this study deserves special significance. The next chapter presents a review on this.

References


