Representing Third World Environmental Activism

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Abstract—The paper argues that contrary to conventional wisdom, Third World Environmental action is not a pre-existing reality, but is brought into existence in representation. Drawing from an environmental movement in India, it proposes that First World discourse produces Third World difference by linking such movements with questions of life and livelihood. It is this discourse which creates indigenous authenticity by locating Third World activism within a pre-modern social world. The paper is intended to problematize such easy formulations.

Keywords—Environment, Livelihood, Representation, Third World.

I. INTRODUCTION

THIRD World environmentalism is often represented, in the words of Gadgil and Guha, as a concern with the "question of equity" 1. It is interesting to note that in Western environmental discourses, the West is always projected as the subject of environmental history. It may be because the exploitation of environment is no longer seen as an imperative for growth given that mass industrialization has already happened and countries have already moved away from industry to the service sector. This affluent condition generates a concern for environment because environmental plentitude and fresh air is seen as the latest luxury in an age which commodifies everything.

It may be added here that Western notions of environmental consciousness as an antidote to the evils of industrialization did not find much favour with postcolonial countries that were desperately trying to justify their independence by catching up with the West. In the early days of catching up with the West, environment and sustainability were anathema in Third World countries as they were seen as Western tools to stall the progress of postcolonial states. The postcolonial developmental state had no patience for such Western preaching as they saw in it a manifestation of Western hypocrisy. Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad was such an exponent who challenged the dishonesty of Western environmental policies which he thought would arrest the growth of postcolonial countries like Malaysia.

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II. THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION

As mentioned earlier, Third World environmentalism as a struggle over equity has become a kind of platitude in environmental literature. This Third World difference is constructed carefully by focusing on the questions of life and livelihood or basic human survival. It is often ignored that this Third World reality cannot exist outside representation, and that it is created and sustained within discourse by iteration and performance. Though conventionally, the symbolic realm of language is seen to have direct access to the origin of a movement, a constructivist approach instead will propose that environmental problems are not always materially existing realities; rather they are everyday problems which are co-opted into the environmental discourse to make them reappear as environmental problems. Thus environmental citizenship comes with the subjection of a version of livelihood question to a global vocabulary which not only appropriates this Third World problem, but also reproduces this problem as environmental. Environmental meanings are not just there; they become so in language while being represented and while being decoded. It is only within a specific signifying space that a problem becomes known as environmental problem and gets established as reality.

We can argue that environmental discourse uses various ways to environmentalize Third World livelihood problems as environmental problems thus retaining the right to ascribe environmental subjecthood to Third World people. This not only depoliticizes Third World movement; it also robs the movement of its agency by locating it within the framework of livelihood and basic life. But news media and external activists who come to provide a sense of direction to environmental movements and produce environmental consciousness among the people sustain these Third World differences. This fits into the idea of a corrosive capitalism and a pre-modern homogeneous people. It is in language that Third World difference is pitched as geographically and epistemologically different.

In this discourse, the Third World subject morphs into nature, sharing with the latter some kind of spiritual kinship. This kinship is always celebrated uncritically in environmental literatures. But Amita Baviskar, in her study in central India, has brought into light the ambivalence of tribal leaders towards tribal-nature relationship which activists believe is the bedrock of tribalism. A tribal leader Amarsinh Chaudhari once said that

though tribals have a relationship with forests and land, it is because they have no other choice and that if they could, they would come out of the forest and benefit more. Baviskar adds that "life in the forest is not desired by adivasis but is forced on them" 2 as it makes a perfect case of Third World environmentalism. In such a scenario, there is a subtle attempt to produce tribals in environmental literature that conforms to global ideas of Third World resistance, though it elides the complex relations tribals have with land and also the larger question of development. Though tribals are silenced by academics/activists and become objects of knowledge, they interestingly have the epistemic privilege of being topics of environmental debate.

Let us see how representation creates environmental platitudes by drawing from anti-Vedanta agitation in Odisha, an eastern state of India. In a meeting organized by Niyamagiri Suraksha Samiti in May 2013 in Muniguda, Odisha, thousands of Dongria Kandhas came in a procession demanding the complete withdrawal of Vedanta from Niyamagiri. All of them were in tribal gear, with musical instruments and weapons that made their social and epistemological difference visible. But that difference was contrasted to sameness which was made manifest in the banner which carried slogans in both Odia and English: "Save our land, forest, water, life and livelihood" which was meant for media, NGOs and sympathizers or powers that be. The visualization of difference and performative tribal tradition here act as staple diet for global environmental discourses. Third World difference is made visible in dresses and language, and sameness is made manifest by its performance in English so that it can be appropriated by global discourses. This sameness-difference also complicates the notion of Third World environmental movement as a spontaneous movement and presents it as orchestrated, planned and packaged.

The coverage of anti-Vedanta movement uses language and metaphors which perpetuate the anteriority of the Kandhas and represent them as relics of the past even while romanticizing their pre-modern life-style. There are some commentators who replicate the state's understanding of normative development as a movement away from tradition and subsistence farming while being sympathetic to people's resistance to the so-called development projects. It comes as no surprise that Martinez-Alier and Temper 3 see all resistance movements, including Kandha struggle against Vedanta, as a clash between development and tradition. Even though there are fragments within the movement as it is in any other movements, these contradictions are never projected, or are minimized, to create an idea of a united ecological people standing against state development. These discourses painstakingly produce notions of Dongria Kandhas as hunter-gatherers who have opted to live outside modernity and civilization.

The agentic notion of tribals is thus possible in the act of submission so that the environmental discourse can legitimate itself as a rescue narrative. Tribals who do not subscribe to this narrative are no tribals as they have apparently succumbed to the state or foreign company. If the development discourse stereotypes tribes as the background of modernity, environmental discourse more or less does the same by not letting them speak or write their own history. In the anti-Vedanta movement, what is overlooked is the existence of another group called Lanjigarh Anchalika Vikas Parishad (Association for the Regional Development of Lanjigarh), a pro-'development' organization which accuses NSS of stalling the progress of the region. One of the leaders of this group is Jitu Jakesika who was once actively associated with the NSS, but now claims that he was misled by NGO activists who did not want his area to develop. In the mainstream discourses though people like Jitu are often seen as traitors or as company agents who have sold themselves for money or alcohol.

Writing in Sydney Morning Herald, Matt Wade promotes an idea of Dongria Kandha as those who "hunt, gather forest products and carry on subsistence farming in the area" 4. This conforms to the conventional idea of a text-book tribe living a self-sufficient life in the lap of Mother Nature. In one of the protest meetings, Dongria leader Lodu Sikaka addressed a group of protesters determined to save their hills and said, "We are not going to let go of Niyamgiri … Let the government and the company repress us as much as they can. We are not going to leave Niyamgiri, our Mother Earth". These movements also give an opportunity to many international organizations or states to reinvent themselves not only as environment conscious but also as ethical/responsible Western powers. Thus the Anglican Church and the Norwegian Government legitimated themselves when they sold their Vedanta shares to make a political statement that they care for affected Kandhas and that Kandhas should be left in their state of innocence and environmental plentitude. It is not surprising that the tribals came to the Norwegian Embassy in Delhi to express their gratitude in their traditional attire thereby reiterating their struggle as one between tradition and modernity and by posing themselves as children of tradition. The success of the campaign against Vedanta got a boost when the Supreme Court of India rejected the Vedanta proposal to extract bauxite from Niyamagiri Hills without the approval of the tribes.

The success of these movements is believed to have benefited from internationalization. When the Supreme Court decided not to grant the mining right to Vedanta, Survival International's Director Stephen Corry expressed his satisfaction: "this is a huge relief, and shows that companies like Vedanta are not all-powerful: local and global campaigning really does work" 5. Here he was creating a notion of resistance which cannot operate outside international forums and so must be articulated through global discourse. At the same time, global discourses must reinvent themselves as caring and concerned with local difference. This difference is to be found in people's subsistence life-style, language and clothing which will make them appear pre-modern, vulnerable and in need of rescue. Whenever we see a photo of a tribe, care is taken by the publisher/editor to make sure that it evokes

senses of pre-modernity and survival, the reason why they are often seen with their axe or nets, tribal head gear etc. so that they can look different (and so become different). Survival as on organization sees itself as a human rights group and aims at protecting the rights of indigenous peoples. The Home Page of its website tells us that "tribal peoples are being destroyed, and their lands stolen. Ultimately this affects us all, but with your support we can help them win their struggle for survival", which though laudable, appears as a rescue narrative.

This brings us into another interesting debate. If there is no real outside representation and the latter is the producer of the former, then it leads to a situation where the real must depend on the representation to be real. When the sequencing of real and representation breaks, we enter into a universe which is governed only by images and signs. It comes as no surprise that for Kandhas to be real, they must be seen as an imaginary tribe called Navi in an imaginary place called Pandora as in James Cameron movie Avatar. Though there are some parallels between the movie script and the struggle of the affected tribe around Niyamagiri, what is not told is the mediatisation of Kandha struggle and the public relation exercise to realitize the Kandhas. Thus Matt Wade calls his article "Indian hill tribe scores 'Avatar' victory" 6, Survival International celebrates "Ban upheld: Avatar tribe 'to decide' future of Vedanta mine" 7 and Jyoti Thottam in Time Magazine proposes "Echoes of Avatar: Is a Tribe in India the Real-Life Na'vi?" 8

It may be mentioned here that some international activists wrote to James Cameron to get his support to internationalize Kandha struggle. They also published an advertisement in February 2013 in a Hollywood publication Variety seeking the support of Cameron. The ad read "Avatar is fantasy ... and real. The Dongria Kondh tribe in India are struggling to defend their land against a mining company hell-bent on destroying their sacred mountain. Please help the Dongria". If Avatar is fantasy and real, then the Kandha struggle is real as well as fantasy. This is why it can get reality status and legitimacy when it is compared to a fantasy movie and when this comparison is published in a Hollywood magazine. In 2010, anti-Vedanta activists protested outside Vedanta's office in London while dressed as Navi tribe with placards reading "Save the Real Avatar Tribe". Though we see here an attempt to publicize Kandha resistance, there is also a subtle attempt to virtualize reality as it is an attempt to materialize the cinematic. It is no surprise that director James Cameron and actor Joanna Lumley extended their support to anti-Vedanta movement.

III. CONCLUSION

Fundamental to the environmental discourse is the ontology of Third World difference materialized in the questions of life and livelihood which then act as sites of difference from First World environmentalism. This difference invites Western scholars or Indian activists to articulate and represent that difference in language, seminars, debates and discussions

leading to epistemological and material difference between First World and Third World. At the global level, this difference is produced by NGOs, rights and environmental groups and finds echo among national civil society activists and left-leaning academics who help this difference appear materially real. At the local level, this is carried forward and sustained by people who project a united front against the state or a private company. But a highly localized problem affecting a few hundred or thousand people can become a major environmental problem only when it is represented and made known and when the delivery of such theorizing captures the movement without any room for contestation.

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