



## THE RESILIENT KERALA WOMEN: CASE STUDIES FROM THE MOOLAMPILLY AGITATION

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### ABSTRACT

**KEYWORDS:**  
gender, activism,  
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social movement.

*The present study explores women's pathways to the participation in social justice advocacy with special reference to Moolampilly agitation. The International Container Transshipment Terminal of Vallarpadam is the India's first global hub terminal, which made the great commercial city, Kochi, Kerala, world famous today. With the implementation of ICTT, Kochi became a key centre in the shipping world reducing India's dependence on foreign ports to handle transshipment. However the displacement of 326 families for the ICTT road and rail connectivity has become a classic case of 'development versus human rights'. Forced out of their land and homes to make way for the ICTT project at Kochi, the lives of most of the evictees at Moolampilly turned upside down. The hard-won rehabilitation package had remained just a promise on paper for more than three years. The present study is a case study of five women activists who protested against the unfair rehabilitation package of Kerala Government which finally brought success. It tries to throw some light on the factors leading women to enter into social justice advocacy and the major forces that support the development of a woman as an activist.*

### INTRODUCTION

The present study explores women's pathways to the participation in social justice advocacy with special reference to Moolampilly agitation. The International Container Transshipment Terminal (ICTT) of Vallarpadam is the India's first global hub terminal, which made the great commercial city, Kochi, world famous today. With the implementation of ICTT, Kochi became a key centre in the shipping world reducing India's dependence on foreign ports to handle transshipment. It's the largest individual terminal and also the first port based Special Economic Zone in the country. The most important impact of ICTT on its neighbourhood area was the greater degree of economic development, by generating greater number of employment opportunities, increase in income, inflation of land value, launching of new building complexes and several banks etc.

Development interventions have varying impacts on the lives of people. The ICTT project is a dream come true for many. But for some it is a "dream project turned sour". Like many other development projects in India, the ICTT at Vallarpadam also includes a bitter story of displacement. Displacement at Vallarpadam was not for the construction of the ICTT but for its Road and Rail connectivity. The 4.62 km long Rail Bridge between International Container Transshipment Terminal on Vallarpadam Island and the main land of Kochi, which was built across the Vembanad Lake has

become the longest rail bridge in India making it popular both locally and globally. However, the displacement process at Moolampilly did not turn out well. It has become a clear cut human right violation.

The rehabilitation package as per the government order had remained just a promise on paper for more than three years. The eviction process at Moolampilly has also created tension between the evictees and the authorities. That is the eviction at Moolampilly was without any prior notice and it made the situation worst. The Moolampilly displacement was revolutionary, going by the nation's land acquisition history. It conceded the evictee's right to resettlement and rehabilitation. With the intervention of the Kerala High Court, the package, with certain modifications, was extended to the entire 326 families evicted for the highway and rail link. However the displacement of 326 families for the ICTT road and rail connectivity has become a classic case of 'development versus human rights'. Forced out of their land and homes to make way for the ICTT project at Kochi, the lives of most of the evictees at Moolampilly turned upside down.

Moolampilly agitation got attention from different parts of our nation because of its unique nature. Noted Bengali writer and Jnanpith award winner Mahasweta Devi, called Moolampilly as Kerala's Singur. The Singur movement, led by Ms. Mamata Banerjee was an epic and exemplary struggle against State-sponsored tyranny and atrocities. Like that, Moolampilly issue also found success with the participation

of women activists in their continuous struggle for justice. The present study makes an effort to describe the transformation of five house wives into activists and their hardship to win the battle for justice.

### **Fateful Day of Moolampilly Evictees**

The 10 families' world turned upside down on February 6, 2008. On that Ash Wednesday, a holy day for the mostly Christian residents of the island, ten houses were demolished by a bulldozer, squads of labourers and a large posse of policemen sent by the Ernakulam District Administration. Families refusing to leave locked themselves in. Women and Children wailed, while men fumed in anger and agony. Every house was demolished within a few minutes and the evictees slept in the Moolampilly church on that Ash Wednesday night.

From that day onwards, the evictees were living in hutments made of blue plastic sheets and woven palm leaves, by the highway, for more than three years. They were living without any basic facilities like water, electricity and transportation. In spite of all these limitations, their long and continuous struggle for justice finally made the government to declare a fair rehabilitation package. One of the unique natures of this movement was the active participation of women activists, who were housewives without having any previous political experience. So it is important to analyse the factors leading women to enter into social justice advocacy and the major forces that support the development of a woman as an activist.

### **The Success Story**

With the continuous protests, the advocacy for social justice of the Moolampilly agitation finally saw success. The evictees at Moolampilly for the Vallarpadam Transship Container Terminal Project in Kochi entered into an agreement with the Government settling all outstanding issues regarding the rehabilitation package in a conference convened by the Chief Minister on 6th June 2011, which is three years after the eviction.

The government agreed to provide water supply, electricity and road connectivity to a common point in each of the plots earmarked for resettlement of the evictees. The area had been demarcated in such a way that coastal zone regulations would not come in the way of constructing two-storied buildings with sufficient built up area. A sum of Rs. 75,000 was also given to each family for piling as the land given was marshy.

The government also agreed to continue providing rent at Rs. 5000 a month to the evictee's up to six months after the establishment of the infrastructure facilities promised by the government. The arrears in rent were also paid. Twelve families who had been denied allotment of land under the rehabilitation package was given titles and other benefits upon their forfeiting compensation paid under the Land Acquisition Act and withdrawal of cases filed by them against the government. And finally State government has also promised take up with the Cochin Port Trust the issue of providing jobs to a member of each of the evicted families at the Vallarpadam project.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

### **Women Activism Scholarship**

The traditional women's activism narrative emphasizes the individual experience of seeking out activism in response to particular threats, and Goodwin and Jasper (2003, p. 54)

acknowledge that some people do "self-recruit" into advocacy. However, many social movements' scholars have critiqued models that rely excessively on individual grievances, attitudes, and motivations for explaining entry into activism. They devote more attention to describing a complex array of other factors that influence pathways into activism, including recruitment efforts made by existing social movement organizations, a prior history of activism, and social networks (Diani, 2004; Diani & Lodi, 1988; Goodwin & Jasper, 2003; Jasper & Poulsen, 1996; McAdam, 1986; Oberschall, 1973; Snow, Zurcher, & Ekland-Olson, 1980; Tilly, 1978; Walsh, 1981). Prior scholarly work on women's participation in social justice activism often supports the following narrative: apolitical women personally experience a specific social problem and are motivated to become activists based on their concern for their families (Perkins, 2012).

The history of women activism owes much of its origin to Environmental Justice Movements. Environmental justice advocacy is a fruitful case in which to explore women's pathways into activism because of the high numbers of women involved (Bullard, 1993; Di Chiro, 1998; Epstein, 1995; Gibbs, 2002; Gottlieb, 1993; Szasz, 1994; Taylor, 1993; Verchick, 2004). Di Chiro (1992) describes the role of motherhood as a motivator for women environmental justice activist, but is careful to note, "Their identity as simply 'mothers' is by no means always the central focus of their activism" (p. 115).

### **Gender and Displacement Scholarship**

Development in all its forms is inherently a spatial activity. From the most grandiose mega project employing armies of development experts, to the smallest scale community-based resource management plan, all development projects involve reorganizing the meaning and control of space (Peter, 2003). "Like becoming a refugee, being forcibly ousted from one's land and habitat by a dam, reservoir or highway is not only immediately disruptive and painful, it is also fraught with serious long-term risks of becoming poorer than before displacement, more vulnerable economically, and disintegrated socially" (Michael Cernea, 1996).

Gender is a major organizing variable in describing population flows (Radcliffe, 1991). Gender-differentiated population movement significantly influences the structure of a society (Chant and Radcliffe, 1992). Research on gender and migration has flourished since the 1990s (Chant and Radcliffe, 1992; Pedraza, 1991; Pessar and Mahler, 2003; Curran et al., 2006; Mahler and Pessar, 2006), and gender has received attention in the literature on population displacement (Mehta and Srinivasan, 1999). However, the literature on the impact of involuntary displacement on the status, roles and development potential of women remains limited (Parasuraman, 1993; Sweetman, 1998; Colson, 1999). Scudder (2005) recognizes the impact and role of gender in the resettlement process as the key concern when it is applied to the resettlement effects of real world development projects.

### **METHOD**

Moolampilly is a small island in the Kadamakudi Panchayat, Ernakulam district, Kerala, consisting mainly of rural folk with an area 12.29 Sq.km and 1276.4 Hector. According to 2001 census, the total population of this area was 15385 (male-7745 female-7640), consisting of 1240 Scheduled caste population. The total number of literates was found to be 13599 (male-6956 female-6643). There was only one government L.P School in this area. There were 25 SHGs for the 750 households, belonging to poor socio-economic background.

The five women activists for the study were selected based on a discussion with Father Jaison, Director of K.L.M (Kerala Labour Movement) and E.S.S (Ernakulam Social Service Society). E.S.S is a key Non-Governmental organization that supported Kudumbasree (S.H.G) groups in Moolampilly and played a vital role in promoting the advocacy in this area. Five intensive case studies were conducted in order to understand the women's pathways into social justice advocacy in the case of Moolampilly agitation.

**Theoretical framework:** Tracy E. Perkins in her study on women's activism in environmental justice movement in California's San Joaquin Valley (2012) provides a list of factors influencing women's entry into activism. These include personal experience of societal problems in differing degrees, concern about the health of their families, prior experiences of activism, recruitment efforts from friends and social movement organizations, the precedent of role models, the effect of broad historical upswings in activism, negative interactions with government bodies, and the influence of educators, organizers, family, and friends who help women understand that the personal problems that they and others experience are, indeed, larger social problems. In the present study these factors are used for analysing women's pathways into social justice advocacy.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

In the present study, all the five respondents; Jasmine (41), Tessy (38), Rosy Thomas (65), Jancy Antony (49) and Aji Johnson (44), were housewives, belonging to Christian community. They have spent at least half of their lives living within the Moolampilly area. They were all active members of the Kudumbasree Self Help Groups and consistently participated in the Moolampilly agitation till its end. All of them were from very poor socio-economic background. The strike shed had better outlook than the hutment they lived in.

In the present study, each of the factors developed in the Perkin's theory were analysed against the findings. Personal experience of societal problems in differing degrees and concern about their families was found to be the most important driving force, which turned these housewives into activists. Tessy's words prove it right, i.e., "The evictees remain evictees for life and I'm really worried about my children's education. We were evicted during their annual examination, which did affect their results". While Aji Johnson identified concern for her two growing girls; Neethu (17) and Geethu (15) as the prime motive behind her entry into activism, Mrs. Rosy Thomas, regarded her son Augustine's (27) marriage as the most important problem. "He doesn't have any hope for marriage since he is living in a shed", Rosy said.

Jancy Antony had a painful story to tell. They got evicted from their land just after the engagement of her one and only daughter Anju. Her marriage was under their "rehabilitation hutment made up of blue plastic sheets". But she was happy that Anju's husband's family was really very indulgent and supportive. Yet another trauma was that she had to come back to the hutment for her delivery. Both Anju and her new born baby girl had to tolerate the noise and dust of the construction works and also the horrible sight of the bulldozers. Therefore, in all the five cases, personal experience of societal problems in differing degrees and their concern for the family was identified as the most important driving forces that made the housewives enter into activism.

The negative interactions with the government bodies were found to be the second most important factor. This was

very evident in the words of Jasmine when she described the day they got evicted from their land. "They even dumped out the rice cooked for the children returning from the school and destroyed school books". Mrs. Rosy Thomas' comment was also relevant in this regard "the Government, the officials, and the politicians everybody betrayed us". These words reveal the discontentment of the evictees.

The recruitment effort from friends and social movement organizations was also highly influential in the case of Moolampilly agitation. One of the activists, Jancy Antony gives all the credits to Kudumbasree group for giving full strength to mobilize her neighbours. Other activists also agreed to the comment of Jancy. The influence of educators and organizers was yet another significant factor. They all remembered the constant support rendered by the Panchayat member Joseph Thundipparambil, C.R. Neelakantan, chairman of the Moolampilly Struggle Solidarity Committee, Francis Kalathungal, General Convener of the Coordination Committee and Father Jaison, Director of Ernakulam Social Service Society.

The words of Mahaswetha Devi were yet another motivating factor reported by the women activists. In a speech given by Mahasweta Devi, on addressing a meeting organised to express solidarity with the evicted people, she has exhorted the women to come together to resist injustice against the common man by governments. She called Moolampilly as Kerala's Singur and told the women activists about the success story of Mamta Banerjee's Singur movement. Therefore, the precedent of role models was found to be fourth factor. None of the activists in the present study had any prior experiences of activism and the effect of broad historical upswings in activism was also found to have least influence in these cases.

## CONCLUSION

The present study suggests that the Moolampilly agitation brought success in the end even without any prior political exposure; they have entered into activism primarily because of their personal experience of that particular problem in differing degrees and also due to their concern for the family. This was followed by other factors such as, negative interactions with government bodies, recruitment efforts from friends and social movement organizations, the influence of educators and organizers and precedent of role models etc. The effect of broad historical upswings in activism and prior experience of activism were found to have least influence in these cases.

Therefore, the findings of this study add to the traditional women's social justice narrative: *apolitical women personally experience a specific problem and are motivated to become activists primarily by concerns based in the home*. Using empirical data to explore the diversity of apolitical women's pathways into social justice activism the success story of Moolampilly agitation reveals the political abilities of housewives and mothers and provides another way to counter the common stereotype that women are politically immature, and less capable of holding and acting on abstract political commitments than men.

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