

The pandemic does not stop the pollution in River Periyar

Silpa Satheesh (1st June 2020)

Abstract

When the entire world has been witnessing improvements in environmental quality, a river in Kerala flows in many colors due to pollution. River Periyar has been flowing in black and white through the Eloor-Edayar industrial region ever since the lockdown started in the state. On Earth Day, members of the grassroots environmental movement, *Periyar Malineekarana Virudha Samithi* (PMVS, Periyar Anti-Pollution Campaign), staged a protest, wearing masks and without violating social distancing etiquette, to call out the continued release of toxins into the river even during the pandemic. This essay is written building on a conversational interview with Purushan Eloor, the frontline leader of PMVS, and by analyzing the video recording of the protest organized on Earth Day.

Pollution in Periyar continues unabated

Periyar, the longest river in Kerala, has been flowing in black and white colors carrying industrial effluents, amidst the pandemic. This is ironic considering the significant improvements in environmental quality reported from across the world during the spread of the pandemic. Reflecting on the unique predicament of the river, Purushan Eloor, the frontline leader of PMVS (Periyar Malineekarana Virudha Samithi or Periyar Anti-Pollution Campaign), remarks, “We have been paying attention to the stories from around the world about rivers flowing clear and the slow revival of aquatic life. And we really hoped that the River Periyar would flow clear during the lockdown. However, it has become clear that our expectations were misplaced!”

Explaining the visible and discernible effects of pollution in the river and aquatic life, Purushan Eloor continues:

Pollution issues have accentuated to dangerously high levels since the lockdown came into effect on March 22, 2020. The river was seen flowing in black color for more than 20 times, and at times the river flowed in white color with thick layers of pollutants floating on the surface. Fish-kills were reported in the river for about four times. We must understand that a river flowing in black also implies that the entire river ecosystem is dismantled. Earthworms that live on riverbeds were spotted dead and floating in a stretch of river starting from Pathalam bridge to almost 5 km down the stream. The dead fish and earthworms clearly indicate the toxicity of the chemicals released to the river.

As the excerpt points out, the visible effects of pollution in the form of discoloration of river water and fish kills signify the negative environmental burdens borne by the local ecology and community as part of industrial development in the region. Despite continued efforts and struggles by local environmentalists to put an end to the release of untreated industrial effluents into the river, pollution in the river continues unabated even during the lockdown. The problem is compounded, given the possibility of the toxic pollutants entering the drinking water pumping station located in the river.



Purushan Eloor, the frontline leader of the Periyar Anti-pollution Campaign.
Source: Facebook

“There is no alternative to drinking water”: Earth Day protest

On April 22, 2020, *Periyar Malineekarana Virudha Samyukatha Samara Samithi* (Periyar Anti-Pollution Joint Protest Committee) [staged a protest](#) in the Eloor-Edayar industrial belt in Kerala to call out the continued pollution of River Periyar even during the lockdown. A few members¹ of the environmental groups lined up on the Pathalam regulator cum-bridge, built across the river. Protestors holding placards wore masks and maintained a safe distance from each other in compliance with social distancing norms prevailing during the pandemic.

Talking about the rationale for organizing the Earth Day protest, Purushan said, “Our mission here is to revamp River Periyar. This protest is only the last and most recent one in a very long history of struggles to save this river.” He

¹ Apart from Purushan Eloor, the members who participated in the Earth Day protests include Anwar, Azeez Elamana, Iqbal, Mahesh Kumar, Sakeer Hussain, Shabeer, and Shamsudheen Edayar.

continued to detail the conditions that led to the protest and described the event as follows:

In a context where the river kept flowing in black, on Earth Day, we decided to organize a protest, more like a symbolic resistance to the ongoing pollution. We planned to organize this event without violating any lockdown regulations imposed by the Central and State governments, and by maintaining social distance...in other words, we planned this as an act of protest that does not violate the law, and that's exactly how we managed to stage the protest. Since there was a curfew, only five of us staged the protest holding placards. All five of us were immediately arrested. However, later when a local politician came to take us out on bail, he was informed that there are orders from above requiring the police to hold us in custody until the Pollution Control Board (PCB hereafter) officials complete the collection of samples. This evidently shows how our presence and intervention is perceived as undesirable by local industries and unions who have access to the higher echelons of power.

The protestors were released by the end of the day only after the sampling process was completed. However, there have been no institutional initiatives to curb the release of pollutants into the river even when this essay is being written. People continued to record and document the river flowing in black in the succeeding days and share that on Facebook.

As highlighted in the mission of the movement, the protest staged over the river reaffirmed the centrality of the river in the lives and livelihoods of the people in the region. This focus on the river was further reflected in the placards and slogans used during the Earth Day protest. One of the collective action frames used during the protest said, "There is no alternative to drinking water." Such slogans succinctly capture how the local environmentalists establish the severity of the problem by highlighting the implications of continued pollution on the availability of clean and safe drinking water. More so, the strong presence of the river in the protest vocabularies such as "Will we thrive if the river dies? Save Periyar," marks the long legacy of the movement organized to save the river from pollution. Most importantly, the protest and frames used such as this one, "April 22, Earth Day. Stop the Pollution in Periyar," expose the irony of celebrating Earth Day when a river, which is also the primary source of drinking water, flows in many colors carrying industrial effluents.



Earth Day Protest against Industrial Pollution in Kerala.
Source: Mohanan M.N

Another important aspect surrounding the most recent protest event has been the use of technology to spread awareness and garner wider support for the fight against pollution. The live streaming of the protest via Facebook Live also enabled people across the world to observe the protest virtually. This helped in receiving media coverage and public attention on the issue and the act of defiance. Besides, Facebook has been used as a platform for documenting evidence in addition to spreading information about the plight of the river. Live streaming the videos of the river flowing in black and white colors helped in documenting the release of effluents into the river. Many of such videos gathered more than 81.8K views and more than 7K shares on Facebook. One such video posted on Facebook clearly shows a cloud of black effluents slowly spreading across the river underwater. This helped in countering the usual denial from the Kerala State Pollution Control Board (PCB hereafter), the local authority responsible for monitoring and containing pollution.

“Stop the unholy nexus between industries and the PCB”: Fighting the nexus between industries and PCB

The Earth Day protest also called out how the nexus between industries and the PCB, a state agency, is preventing the implementation of any sustainable solutions for curbing the release of untreated effluents into the river. The problem of industrial pollution in Periyar has a very long history and trajectory dating back to the 70s. The region housing more than 280 chemical industries were declared a toxic hotspot in 2003. At least 50 industries have pipes that release industrial effluents directly into the river.

The story of industrial pollution in the region is compounded by the story of institutional apathy and negligence by PCB. More so, local environmentalists allege that the PCB has been facilitating pollution by producing reports that link river discoloration to factors other than industrial effluents. One of the slogans used during the protest exposes this compliance as follows, “When Periyar flows

black, that's caused by the rotten grass. And when it flows in red, that's due to disturbances at the riverbed—le PCB.”

The Earth Day protests and the subsequent intervention from the Kerala High Court directed the PCB to collect water samples from the river for testing. According to Adv. Ashkar Khader, who leads the legal fight against pollution, the scientific reports released by two government agencies came up with two competing inferences. When the Irrigation report confirmed the presence of heavy metals and extremely low DO (dissolved oxygen) levels in the stretch of the river next to the industries, the PCB report only makes cursory reference to this.

According to Purushan, some of the important demands outlined by the protestors include:

One of the important demands we proposed was to find the reasons behind the discoloration of the river. PCB knows the reasons very well, but they continue to say that they don't. We all know that water is colorless, odorless, and tasteless. However, the water in this river flows in many colors, has a pungent smell, and tastes terrible. This implies that the water in River Periyar is a chemical compound. The reason for discoloration can be pinned down to the toxic and untreated effluents released from the industries on the banks of the river. The continuous release of such chemical effluents would bring down the level of dissolved oxygen (DO) in the river. It is disappointing that even when we exposed the sources of such pollution, the negligence from PCB cares to take no action. This stand taken by PCB stands testimony to the institutional negligence and apathy displayed by an institution entrusted with the responsibility to monitor and control pollution. We were fighting against this injustice. And by saying that, I would like to reiterate that this protest has been just one event in the long history of struggles against pollution here.... We demand PCB to break free from corruption and take action to remediate the issue of industrial pollution in the river.

Other major demands raised by the local community include implementing mechanisms to prevent the release of industrial effluents into the river and maintaining a material-balance record for all operating industries. The local environmentalist illustrates how the current situation is conducive to the unfettered release of effluents into the river and for that reason the local environmentalists demand the construction of a dike along the banks of the river throughout the industrial belt to monitor and control the release of industrial wastes into the river through underground and hidden pipes. This has been an important recommendation made by several scientific committees appointed by the state.

Furthermore, Purushan elaborates on how a community-based pollution monitoring committee can help break the nexus between private industries and the PCB as follows:

We have been demanding a Local Committee modeled after the Local Area Environmental Committee formed by the Supreme Court of India in 2004. We envision this as a monitoring committee constituted by local stakeholders, including inland fish workers, local environmentalists as well as PCB. Such a community built on the principle of social accountability alone can monitor, regulate, and contain the issue of industrial pollution in this region. This can put an end to this nexus between private industries and the PCB. In doing all of this, I am sure the condition of River Periyar would improve if we do this. In fact, our struggle for the last 25 years or so has been to save this river. To bring back the old River Periyar, a river in which we all used to bath, we are trying to revamp the river we all once had.

The excerpt reiterates the centrality of the river in the protest vocabularies and motives of the local environmental movement. The primary mission of the movement emerges loud and clear from the excerpts, and it is a commitment to “Save Periyar.” The clarity of diagnoses and prognoses done by the local movement is further evidenced by the careful distancing of the movement from any groups that call for the complete shutdown of all industries in the region. Frames such as “We are against pollution and not against the industries,” used by the movement uncovers how the movement recognizes how industries form an integral part of the livelihoods of the factory workers in the region.

Left and environment in Kerala

The Earth Day protest highlights the unending issue of industrial pollution that has forced the people in the region to deal with the double pandemic: Covid-19 and toxic industrial effluents. “We could tame Nipah, we are taming Corona, but we couldn’t yet tame the people who pollute River Periyar? Why would that be?” said a member of the grassroots environmental group in a Facebook post. The lingering issue of pollution in the Eloor-Edayar region raises questions about the Kerala model of industrial development.

Kerala recently garnered international attention for its remarkable initiatives to contain the spread of the pandemic². The response spearheaded by [Minister K.K. Shailaja](#) reaffirms the continued relevance of socialized health care and the provision of necessities to tackle public health crises. Furthermore, the model of pandemic response emulated by the communist government in Kerala grounded in the idioms of social solidarity, stand in stark opposition to the crumbling health system in capitalist countries such as the U.S. However, the protests in Eloor-Edayar raises pertinent questions about the environmental sustainability of the development model and how the nexus between state authorities and

² https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/aggressive-testing-contact-tracing-cooked-meals-how-the-indian-state-of-kerala-flattened-its-coronavirus-curve/2020/04/10/3352e470-783e-11ea-a311-adb1344719a9_story.html

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/apr/21/kerala-indian-state-flattened-coronavirus-curve>

industrial capitalists amplify the issues at the ecological front. Further exemplifying the role of environment in Kerala's development, Purushan remarked:

When the Left Democratic Front (LDF) government came to power, they made a promise to conserve the environment. In fact, environmental conservation was an important agenda in their election manifesto. Once the government assumed power, they stated that conserving the water bodies of our state is of prime importance. So far as the revamping of rivers is concerned, I think, the government perceives this only in terms of river widening and deepening. It completely ignores the preservation of river catchment areas. More importantly, the state has overlooked the issue of river pollution. There has been no systematic effort to curtail the dumping of wastes and pollutants into the river...In other words, the promise to preserve the rivers does not translate into action. It's been four years ever since the new government took office, and I am disappointed to say that I won't even give "pass marks" for its performance at the environmental front. A state like Kerala that receives international accolades for its performance on many other fronts is stalling at the environmental front. And I am forced to assume that this is due to other priorities. We continue to believe that a state that truly is a model state on so many other fronts would, at some point, take adequate action to alleviate the issue of pollution.

As narrated in the excerpt above, despite the stride made in social and public health sectors, the proliferation of grassroots environmental struggles highlights the environmental issues associated with the development and infrastructure projects launched in the state. PMVS emerged as a working-class environmental movement and continues to hold strong affiliations to left politics. Most of the members are continued members/erstwhile members of the Communist Party (CPIM). This complicates the dominant narratives pitting progressive politics against environmentalism. Grounded in principles of equality and social justice, most environmental struggles in Kerala seek to expose how the environmental burdens of development are unequally borne by people at the margins.

In sum, the working-class and Marxist ideological orientations of many of these local environmental struggles ([Vayalkili struggle in Kannur](#), [Save Alappad](#) campaign against mineral sand mining, [Kandankali Samaram](#), etc.) poses important questions about the interface between left and environmental politics in the state. By exposing the impasse between environment and development, the grassroots environmental movements in Kerala uncover the need to perceive the environment as a class issue that needs to be brought to the center of the idioms and practices surrounding development. More so, the heightened vulnerability to climate change disruptions make such questions urgent and makes it imperative for the states to reimagine development in the post-pandemic world by making it ecologically just and sustainable.

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About the author

Silpa Satheesh successfully defended her dissertation exploring the conflicts between labor and environmental movements in Kerala from the Department of Sociology at University of South Florida. Her research focuses on issues surrounding environment, development and social movements in Kerala, India. She can be contacted at silpas AT usf.edu