

Letting Coke off the hook

(Source: <http://www.indiatogether.org/2008/may/env-cdsbook.htm>)

A new book by authors based at the Thiruvananthapuram-based Centre for Development Studies (CDS) attempts to make the case that the rain-gods, farmers and public institutions were the culprits for Plachimada's water scarcity, and not the beverage major Coca Cola. P N Venugopal analyses the findings.

19 May 2008 - The agitation against beverage major Coca Cola at Plachimada in Kerala entered the 7th year on April 22. Adivasis of Perumatty panchayat in Palakkad district, where the Cola factory is situated, and the environmental activists across the country have reiterated their determination to carry on till the Hindustan Coca Cola Beverages Pvt. Ltd. (HCBPL) pays adequate compensation for the damage done to nature and the local people. The general perception is that the multinational corporate is responsible for the water scarcity and the pollution of groundwater sources in the area.

At this juncture, in March 2008, the Thiruvananthapuram-based Centre for Development Studies (CDS), has come out with a book [*Water Insecurity, Institutions & Livelihood Dynamics - A Study in Plachimada*](#). The book is co-authored by Dr K N Nair, the Director, CDS, Dr Antonyto Paul and Professor Vineetha Menon also of the CDS, and published by Daanish Books, New Delhi. It is the result of research done by the authors over a period of four years and is funded by the University of Zurich. The CDS, an autonomous entity financed by the central and state government, is one of the most prestigious research institutions in the country.

The book analyses the role played by public institutions like the local body, the state groundwater department, pollution control board, the state government and various courts in the Plachimada issue and indicts them for various commissions and omissions. While the book does acknowledge HCBPL's role in polluting ground water, its conclusions on the connection between the beverage major and water scarcity at Plachimada leave open many questions.

The invitation to Coca Cola to set up a factory by the then Left Democratic Front government in 1998, the eventual closure of the factory, the Kerala High Court verdict favouring the company, the appeal filed by the government in the Supreme court, the struggle spearheaded by the Coca-Cola Virudha Samara Samithi, the role of media, finding of poisonous substances in the solid waste of the

factory by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), the powers conferred on the local bodies under the 73rd and 74th amendments of the constitution, and the crucial question of who is the owner of groundwater - all these are brought under the scanner.

The book claims that there are more factors than just Coca Cola responsible for the shortage of water in Plachimada. The farmers of the panchayat are held equally or even more responsible. They dug more and more borewells and deepened the existing wells for watering the coconut trees to the cultivation of which they shifted from paddy, cotton and groundnut. This is where the book disappoints.

One would naturally expect the experts from the CDS to provide readers with the statistics regarding the number of borewells at a given point of time and the number of wells as of now or at least that of 2004, when the other samples for the research were collected. However the documentation flatly states that the number of borewells in the study area consisting of the eight and ninth wards of the panchayat are 'not available'! Yet the authors have no qualms in claiming that the number of wells has increased.

The book further elaborates its assumptions in a most laboured manner. Each coconut tree requires 1200 to 1500 litres per 9 to 12 days. Farmer in Kerala do not water coconut tree for more than six or seven months a year because of the two monsoons. This is roughly 20-times in a whole year. When the coconut prices fell, the trees were given for toddy tapping and to increase the yield of toddy, the farmers intensified the irrigation. Taking this into account, the authors state that the groundwater was depleted.

There are a number of issues with this conclusion. One, the quantum of water that is required for a tree, according to the Coconut Development Board is only 600 to 800 litres. The authors must have estimated the total number of coconut trees in the region to further develop an estimate of the proportion of water consumed by coconut farming. They did not do this.

The research also ignores the fact that there is a 'return flow' of at least 30 percent of the water used for irrigation and that this goes to replenish the groundwater. This is especially true in the case of coconut gardens as pits dug around the coconut trees hold the water for quite a period of time and the fibrous roots of the trees too help. The leaves of the trees work as shades preventing speedy evapo-

transpiration. There is no return flow in any industry with water as raw material, like that of soft drink manufacturing.

"Reduction in rainfall for consecutive years in the study area," is cited as another reason. Chittoor block, in which Perumatty panchayat is situated, always had less rainfall than the average for the whole of Kerala ever since the time the meteorological department started collecting rain data. It's quite natural for the region to get lesser rainfall, during those years when the rainfall in the whole of Kerala was less. In fact, HCBPL had announced in their website back in 2005 that the scarcity in Plachimada was due to reduced rainfall during three consecutive years. The present study only serves as an endorsement of the claim by the company that they were in no way responsible for the water scarcity.

The failure of Parambikulam Aliyar Project (PAP) is listed as another factor for water shortage in the panchayat. The PAP is a water sharing agreement between Kerala and neighbouring Tamilnadu and covers almost the entire Palakkad district. It is true that Perumatty panchayat does not receive adequate amount of water from PAP. But many other panchayats too are affected by the failure of the project.

'Deterioration of traditional tank irrigation systems' is pointed out as yet another factor in precipitating the problem. Here again, collapse of traditional irrigation systems is a common feature all over Kerala and Perumatty panchayat is not a case in isolation.

And lastly, as if making a concession, the book says: "Coupled with such problems, the daily extraction of around five lakh litres of groundwater by the HCBPL aggravates the water scarcity problem."

For the sake of argument, let us assume that the four reasons attributed for depletion of groundwater at Perumatty other than the Cola major's drawing of water are true and correct. Even so, these reason ought to be applicable in lesser or larger measures in many panchayats in Kerala, especially in Palakkad. Pattancherry, Eruthempathy, Vadakarapathy, are all in the same Chittoor Taluk, and none of those areas had water scarcity to the extent of Perumatty. In fact, a study done by the state Groundwater department in 2006 had revealed that the groundwater level of Perumatty Panchayat had increased substantially in the two years after the Coke factory ceased to function, when compared to a study done while the company was functioning.

The book more or less agrees with the general perception that the HCBPL was responsible for the pollution of drinking water sources. Even here, the book falls short. The next logical step is to apply the 'polluter pays' theory and make a suitable recommendation (since the book has taken up on itself the onus to recommend livelihood alternatives for those who were affected by the water scarcity and pollution). However, the book is conspicuously silent on the responsibility of the beverage major to adequately compensate those who have suffered. Instead it advocates the generation of more non-farm employment, promotion of rural enterprises based on agro-processing and implementation of central and state relief packages focusing on these aspects.

Laudable no doubt, but what a relief for the Cola giant! In sum, the book seems to be an effort at convincing the public that the rain-gods, the farmers, the public institutions were the culprits for the Plachimada's water scarcity. (*Quest Features & Footage*)

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