

Mattewara: Despatch from the frontlines of an Environment Protest

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10th July 2022, I stood on the shores of river Sutlej in a protest against a textile park. The park was proposed under the 'Farm to Fibre to Factory to Fashion to Foreign' agenda of Prime Minister Modi in 2020 to be built on the ecologically sensitive land between the river Sutlej and the historic Mattewara forest. Bhagwant Mann, the current Chief Minister of Punjab, though opposed to the textile park in 2020 had reneged after coming into power and now wanted to go ahead with the land allotment and construction. Fearing the destruction of one of the last standing forest corridors in the state, a group of environmental activists had given a call for a protest almost ten days ago. As the issue was neither religious nor regional like sharing of river waters or sacrilege of Sikh scriptures; not many were expecting a massive gathering.

Rather, thousands showed up. Farmer Unions which had spearheaded the Farm Bill protests a year ago at Delhi borders stood tall. A contingent after another, in groups of five or ten, with their flags on their shoulders and their signature green turbans arrived all morning to the protest site. Students, religious groups, aid organizations, media, politicians from every major party and citizens from remote parts of the state found their way to the emotionally charged protest site. Shocked by this support and fearing further escalation of the protest, the newly elected state government announced the cancellation next morning.

1.

Back at my University, in a discussion on climate change, an Indian Member of Parliament, Priyanka Chaturvedi, argues that "developing countries are going to face double the injustice of climate change"; along with facing the rising temperatures, "we are told to find solutions at the expense of our economy". *Told* — by the western/developed world. She is not alone in making this argument, *politicians and policy makers* from the Global South have pushed the narrative of "right to development" for at least a few decades. The countries from the global North have benefited immensely from the carbon led development for over the last two centuries, the argument goes, and so the onus of mitigating the climate crisis should also fall on them rather than the countries still in the process of development .

Yet this narrative masks and oversimplifies the political economy of climate injustice in the developing world. Surely, this isn't the view unilaterally shared by all of the global south, if so then it becomes almost impossible to acknowledge the existence of protests and climate movements like Mattewara — where the textile plant would indeed 'benefit' the resource poor local residents by providing jobs and economic growth but is still resisted. Or for that matter protests in Gondalpur against Adani's coal plants and the Save Aarey protests in Mumbai. These are also not a recent developments, the resistance to environmental degradation as a result of 'growth' projects of the independent Indian state go back at least to the 1970s with the historic Chipko movement where the protestors hugged and clung to the trees to protect deforestation or the Save Silent Valley movement to protect the forest land from being submerged by a proposed hydro-electric power plant in Kerala.

Does this then imply that there is an active faction within the global south advocating for a commoning and solidarity with northern powers against the climate crisis? An understanding, perhaps, that the 'right to development' doesn't necessarily have to be a 'right to pollute'. Or are we at a tipping point where the ecosystem has degraded so much that the tradeoff between economic growth and environment is not a tradeoff anymore. Whether, after losing all the forest cover in the last few decades, we can still see the last tokens going away as mere externalities/collateral damage?

But more importantly, in South Asia, with its soaring rates of poverty, communal polarization and the widening gap between the rich and the poor, what does it even mean to protest against climate injustice? Is climate and environment degradation a mere splinter in the whirlpool which pokes trouble occasionally or does climate injustice accumulates with other injustices into a corpus to the point that any notion of causality and identification loses its ground? What poison does a person pick and what poison do they leave when they get on a three hour bus ride to get to the Mattewara protest in a hot and humid July afternoon?

2.

One poison that did not seem to be left behind at the Mattewara protest was the inescapable reality of government-corporate nexus in India. I was handed a flier by an old Sikh man from the 'Kudrat-Manav Kendrit Lok Lehar' (Nature-Human Centered Public Movement) at the protest which listed in Punjabi how the economic inequality was rising steeply in India. That fifty eight Indians held more 'Sarmaiya' (Wealth) than the bottom fifty percent. And that the "current (Indian) development model completely ignored natural and human resources". This was resounded by Prof. Manjit Singh on the stage, remarking that our government presupposes itself to be "answerable solely to the corporate and not the common public". And again by Mani Ram Punia, from Rajasthan, when he rhetorically asked

the protestors that “What is a Corporate? Is it a snack? Is it a drink? Who is it? And Where does it live?”

This far away and deceptive corporate demon which is neither the government nor an afternoon snack has quietly established itself as the enemy in the climate protests. The numbers confirm its lurking presence. Inequality in India, both of wealth and income, has risen sharply over the past decades. Top one percent of the earners' income makes up to twenty two percent of the total earnings while the wages of the poorest have been stagnating, shows the work of Lucas Chancel and Thomas Piketty. Wealth is even more concentrated; with the top one percent holding forty one percent of the total wealth according to the Oxfam report. Unfortunately, much of the rise at the very top hasn't been the regular entrepreneurs making it big in Prime Minister Modi's 'New India', rather it has been backed by the nefarious link between the government and businessmen benefiting off of each other. India's richest man, Gautam Adani, is “not only the beneficiary of the new political and economic order devised by Modi” but “his frictionless rise shows the ascent of another hyper-nationalist elite with dubiously sourced wealth and an extreme aversion to the rule of law and civil liberties” writes Pankaj Mishra in his essay about the rise of Modi and Adani.

Still, this demon has managed to stay elusive. The gathering at Mattewara, for instance, did seem to actively resist something bigger than a textile park yet no one could exactly pinpoint what? When the farm bill protests began in August 2020, some of the early protest locations were the Ambani owned Reliance Supermarkets and Petrol Stations in Punjab. Why protest and shut down private enterprises which sell clothes and fuel for a governmental legislation about farming? Unless of course the people think that the two are together in bed or worse that one has the other in its pocket. Yet, India is still to see large scale protests or resistance against the rising wealth inequality like the Occupy Wall Street protests in the US after the Great Recession, or the movements across Europe and Latin America. The political opposition in the country has been pressuring Modi and the BJP about its links with Adani and other rich businessmen, yet it remains a political blip compared to the corruption scandals which led to the ultimate demise of the UPA government in 2014 and the rise of Modi.

3.

In this multi-layered and multi-directional space of climate conflict, if finance and carbon diplomacy operate at the international level against the global south and the ever growing hegemony of corporate capital flows in politics function at the country level, then the “Politician-Police-Criminal Coalition” leaves no stones unturned at the hyper-local layer. Manjit Singh Dhaner, an activist and a farmer union member, who was also at the Mattewara protest bears witness to the functioning of this nexus. From

the last twenty five years, he and his fellow residents from Mehal Kalan village in Barnala have been fighting to get justice for Kiranjeet Kaur — who was gang raped and murdered by the nefarious henchmen of Mehal Kalan. On July 29, 1997 books, bicycle and clothes of Kiranjeet were found from the culprits' farms but it was not for another fourteen days that the villagers could raise an agitation and recover the dead body of Kiranjeet. It took another four years of collective action to get the criminals behind bars. Dhaner had to face all manners of threats, intimidation and a litany of cases thrown against him which he has been fighting up till now.

"It is the connections between accumulation, the workforce, the police, the bureaucracy and party politics", write Barbara Harriss-White and Lucia Michelutti, "that incentivise the politicization of crime and the criminalisation of politics". Dhaner warns the gathering about these very connections and points how they manifest markedly in the case of village common lands in Punjab—'Shaamlats'. A legacy of the 1947 partition of Punjab between India and Pakistan, these lands are supposed to be parcels of communal land for each village whose tilling rights are to be auctioned to the highest bidder; and importantly one third of it is unilaterally reserved for the landless Dalits in each village. These communal lands initially served as grazing grounds and were an integral part of the local ecosystem, providing a space for the natural flora and fauna to flourish amid laser-leveled and square cut fields employed for the production of rice and wheat. Soaring land prices over the last few decades, however, has meant a dispossession — both from the environment and the lower caste groups— towards upper castes and corporate investments. Nicolas Martin, in his work, documents how the land almost never goes to the Dalits or low income groups. The market logic of auction succumbs to the criminal-political bargains in the Punjabi political society as the upper caste Jats push their dummy candidates in auctions, or hold the auctions behind closed doors. And in rare cases when rightful groups are indeed able to use the land, as in the case of Sekhowal village, whose almost four hundred acres of land was acquired for the Mattewara Textile Park, they become an easy acquisition for the corporate capital.

4.

The distribution of economic and political power in the current world order is largely correlated with fossil fuel consumption — both between and within nations. As the climate crisis deepens, the resulting disaster and opportunity imbalances hold the potential to drastically shuffle this distribution—exacerbating the existing ethnic and national conflicts. As Christian Parenti calls it, a large number of groups might resort to the "politics of armed lifeboat", pushing the policies of "aggressive anti-immigrant policing and militarized borders", in the pursuit of safeguarding their vested interests. In this relatively small-scale climate emergency, an Indian National Congress leader, Sukhpal

Khaira, already seemed to adopt this posture. He fuelled the insecure nationalism surrounding the protest and argued that the textile park was an attempt to destroy Punjab's natural resources and in the garb of environmentalism pushed the 'armed lifeboat' brand of politics by proposing a bill that would ban the people from outside Punjab from buying land in the state. He announced that he will floor the bill in the next session of the Legislative Assembly. And he did. It was a private members bill and got, thankfully, rejected by the speaker of the assembly.

The same sentiment and defensive vitriol crept into other speeches too. Recently re-elected secessionist Member Parliament Simranjit Singh Mann and a popular local leader Lakha Sidhana's speeches, full of ironies, raised the issue of jailed activists Teesta Setalvad and Mohammed Zubair but it also derogatorily ridiculed the migrant workers from the northeastern parts of the country; it called out the hyper-nationalistic Hindutva politics of RSS and BJP but appropriated the same brand of politics with a long list of the threats to Punjabiya.

This extreme polarization along religious and regional fault lines for many issues including the environment has risen alongside the ascent of Hindu Nationalism in India. In the case of the environment, however, the nationalistic agenda to 'return' India to its previous glory has also meant a reversal in the governance framework. In 'Environmental History in South Asia in the Time of Hindutva', Rohan D'Souza shows that the BJP government has undertaken systematic tearing down of the environment regulation to help businesses and its allies. Critical bans on polluting industries have been lifted, environment clearances have been eased down, wildlife board is nothing more than a mere puppet and India's rankings in Environment Indices have, as a result, plummeted.

5.

Back in a seminar room, a professor asks another professor, "How do you juxtapose the act of a person walking in the heartland of US petro-culture and people marching together in environmental movements?" What is shared between my walk in Hyde Park, Chicago and the march with flags and slogans in Mattewara? Would the climate change induced migrations from South Asia be the photographic negatives of the great displacements during the 1947 partition of the subcontinent? Is there any difference between losing your home to nationalist politics and losing your home to fossil capitalism?

While the first one leaps with uncertainty and surprise at most occasions, climate change and global warming on the other hand, are almost guaranteed to displace millions of people as world temperatures rise. The floods in Pakistan/ Bangladesh and extreme heat waves across South Asia are just some recent

examples. However, this also means that this long and almost certain arc of the Anthropocene under the status quo gives our institutions the needed time to adapt and move its course. These migrations might be subverted with enormous efforts towards a sustainable growth and saving/reversing the damage to the forests, rivers and all forms of natural life. Yet, it seems that the course that the Indian government has chosen, which is also most often prescribed by neoclassical economists, is to reduce the effort to the 'technocratic quest' for renewable sources of energy. In a discussion on Climate Fight, hosted by Energy Policy Institute at the University of Chicago attended by Indian Members of Parliament Rahul Kaswan and Mahua Moitra, among others, the discourse for the most part centers around capital flows required in renewable energy and its storage. 'It is the most exciting investment opportunity' — for the concessional government money and for the asset owners— remarks another panelist, Vinay Chawla (a US Diplomat) when asked about India's climate fight. The incentive, subsidy and innovation machine, however, doesn't operate outside the domain of the government and the unfortunate reality of political connections of the firms. Modi's favorite businessman, Adani, again has had an early call on this 'exciting investment opportunity' and his firm—Adani's Green Energy Company —has become the biggest renewable energy operator in India. It holds assets and capital worth staggering \$8.4 billion dollars and is recovering well from the troubles post the Hindenburg report in January 2023.